

School of Theology at Claremont



1001 1391488

AMERICAN CHARACTER
AND
OTHER ESSAYS

JOHN ERSKINE



The Library
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
AT CLAREMONT

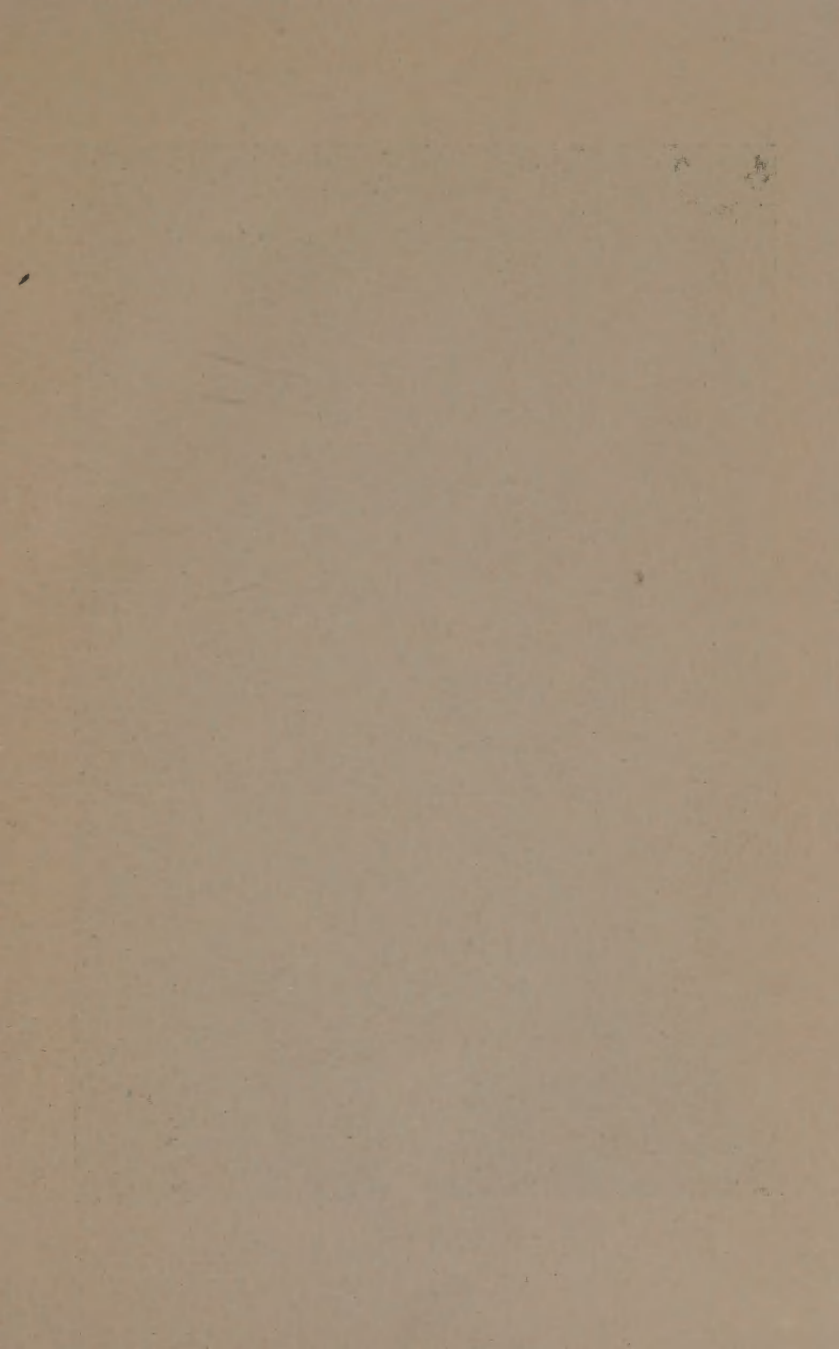
WEST FOOTHILL AT COLLEGE AVENUE
CLAREMONT, CALIFORNIA

Ma Jennings,
Santa Maria

July 1958. Calif

AMERICAN CHARACTER

And Other Essays





JOHN ERSKINE

75
927

AMERICAN CHARACTER

and Other Essays

SELECTED FROM THE WRITINGS
OF
JOHN ERSKINE

Especially for
The Chautauqua Home Reading Series



The CHAUTAUQUA PRESS
Chautauqua New York

1927

Copyright, 1915, 1920, 1923, 1927
By THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY

Theology Library
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
AT CLAREMONT
California

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

BOOK I

AMERICAN CHARACTER

BOOK II

THE MORAL OBLIGATION TO BE INTELLIGENT

BOOK III

THE KINDS OF POETRY

BOOK IV

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

INTRODUCTION

IT gives me pleasure to know that the selections from my essays are to be read by members of the Chautauqua Institution. For a number of years I have been saying in essay form things about life and literature which recently I have tried to dramatize and illustrate in novels. Because I believe in the importance of these ideas, I am grateful to every serious reader who gives them his attention.

The essay on *American Character* was originally delivered as an address at Bedford College, University of London, in December, 1918. Just after the Armistice our allies showed a flattering curiosity about the American people, their habits and their ideas, and a number of us who happened to be on the ground at

INTRODUCTION

the time were invited, both in France and in England, to give addresses on this general topic before audiences intellectually keen and hospitably disposed. My own experience was, I am sure, not unlike that of other lecturers—I had to examine myself closely to find out whether there was such a thing as an American character. In the lecture, which is here reproduced, I suggested reasons for peculiarities in us which foreigners notice, and ways in which we might offset certain inevitable consequences of our history. We are all immigrants, for example, and therefore we lack a local tradition, a rooted sense of the past. Such a sense will come of itself with time, but meanwhile we can perhaps supply the lack of it by a more conscious study of human nature, and a more resolute attempt to manage our lives intelligently.

The essay on *The Moral Obligation to*

INTRODUCTION

be Intelligent was composed as a Phi Beta Kappa oration, and delivered at Amherst College just before the war began. It was first printed in the *Hibbert Journal*, and on its appearance it was attacked by some British readers who saw in it a bumptious criticism of the Old World from an up-start American. These pages, however, were written with only the American audience in mind. When the essay appeared in this country it was criticized again by certain well meaning people as a menace to religious faith and a peril to the young. By some ingenuity which I have never been able to follow, such critics found in my praise of intelligence an attack on conventional morals. I still feel that the essay says clearly what I meant—that to be as intelligent as we can is a moral obligation—that intelligence is one of the talents for the use of which we shall be called

INTRODUCTION

to account—that if we haven't exhausted every opportunity to know whether what we are doing is right, it will be no excuse for us to say that we meant well.

If it is not egotistical to mention it here, I should like to say that my own intellectual life seems to me to date from the writing of this essay, and from the thinking which led up to it. I imagine that I am a quite normal American in the sentiment I feel for beautiful traditions—a sentiment all the stronger, perhaps, because in our land traditions are not so rich as in older countries. Without surrendering any allegiance to tradition, or to piety, or to emotion, I have tried to state my belief that our first duty in this world is to know what the world is like, what we are like, and how our minds and souls behave. It is not enough, as I understand it, to accept rule of thumb

INTRODUCTION

advice about life, or about art. An intelligent man can observe for himself, and since he has this faculty he will not be excused from using it. This point of view ought to be applied, I think, to the study of poetry. It is illustrated at large in the *Literary Discipline*. Here I made what inquiry I could into the way in which our minds operate when we tell a story, or when we read one—into the effect which stories told in words make upon us. What I said here of art I meant as a sort of parable of all life. If you are a sculptor, you are limited in your expression to the kind of things marble or bronze can say. If you are a painter, a flat surface disciplines you. If you work in literature, there too the medium to some extent determines what you can express. A good artist will first of all use his intelligence to find out the limitations of his medium, and he will then

INTRODUCTION

favor those limitations instead of rebelling against them.

The limitations of any medium are disclosed in the effect upon the audience; the study of literary theory, as I understand it, should therefore pay even more attention to the effect on the reader than to the writer's intention. It makes little difference what the writer thought he said unless his words do say it to us. To put it another way, it is not the artist who in the long run finds expression; it is those who love his work. We guess that Shakespeare intended Shylock to be a comic figure. We prefer to see tragedy in him. To that extent we are the creators of Shakespeare's play.

To recognize such facts as these, seems to me the duty of intelligence. In such ideas, however, there are implications, which may at first distress us. To admit that a writer can not say once for all what

INTRODUCTION

he means so that he will be always and in all places understood, suggests that our intellectual life is in a state of irresponsible flux. If this is true of art, is it not equally true of life? Is anything really settled? Is there a sound morality, or an abiding distinction between right and wrong? I have no difficulty in answering these questions for myself. The fortune of a work of art seems variable only because we know little as yet about the psychological laws which make words mean different things to different people. I have no doubt myself that very solid laws do control the fortunes of words and of books. In the realm of conduct, if certain actions which we have considered wrong appear in special cases to be right, the answer is that we have not yet completely defined those eternal laws on which morality rests. But we can't doubt that all conduct has consequences for good or

INTRODUCTION

for evil. To recur to the idea of my early essay, what interests us is the moral obligation to learn as quickly as possible the laws by which, in spite of ourselves, we must live.

JOHN ERSKINE.

BOOK I

AMERICAN CHARACTER

AMERICAN CHARACTER

AT some time or other we all boast of the country to which we belong. The American is said to be extremely boastful. To understand him, however, it is well to observe that he boasts of his country, not of his race, and that he is quite aware of the difference between the man who has a country and the man who belongs to a race, and that he believes the difference is in his favor. He knows better than to think of Americans as derived from a common stock, and he prefers not to think of them as conserving their virtues from their fathers. When he boasts of what his fellow-citizens are, or what they can do, he would express his faith that in origin they are but common men, but that being Ameri-

AMERICAN CHARACTER

cans they have had advantages. The raw material of the American character, he believes, is not the refinement of one blood nor the blend of many races, but the plain substance of human nature; and this raw material, he would say, is brought to perfection by a happy way of life, which usually he does not define beyond his conviction that there is in it much hope, many dreams, and little of the past. Twenty years ago, perhaps, this generalization would not have been true; perhaps it will not hold for tomorrow; but if you would understand the Americans of the moment, the soldiers who made their appearance in the last act of the war, the citizen army in France and the citizen workers at home who suddenly, almost convulsively, realized themselves as a nation, you must begin by noting that they did not realize themselves as a race.

AMERICAN CHARACTER

You must begin with this fact because there the American begins to differ from the Englishman, and let me add, from the German. In his *Address to the Americans*, Mr. Chesterton made a striking contrast between the American national ideal and the German. Germans, he said in effect, are all of one race but of many ranks; Americans are of many races, but wish to be of one rank. He was obviously opposing to that hope of democracy which human nature very generally entertains to-day, that other conception of one peculiar race, God-favored, against which human nature has very recently had to arm itself. But if we were to change Mr. Chesterton's contrast so that it should carry no flavor of condemnation but simply a statement of the difference between neighbors, the Americans would consider it proper to say that the English are of one race! that they prize the tradi-

AMERICAN CHARACTER

tions which can come only with race consciousness; that they think better of the English-born simply because he is born of English blood; that the typical American, if he were an Englishman—that is, if he had a race tradition—would naturally set a high value upon it, and would think favorably of a new acquaintance who could introduce himself as of the same inheritance; but that the American, having come from all races, makes it a point of honor not to ask a newcomer of what race he is—makes it a point of honor to keep to himself, if he has it, or to suppress as far as possible, the sentiment for traditional things—for the family line, for the inherited language, even for the home in the sense of a fixed hearth.

The reason for this American renunciation of race might seem to be primarily what is suggested in Mr. Chesterton's contrast, that we in the United States

AMERICAN CHARACTER

have come from the ends of the earth, and that in order to live together at all we are obliged to slip lightly over matters of origin, which form our chief divergence. Certainly there is some truth in this explanation. But it was not an American who first spoke of the United States as a "melting-pot," and to one who knows the country the phrase is not a true description. If it were, the race would begin after the melting is done. Such an enforced compromise as characterizes any society recruited from varied sources is but a temporary expedient, and if there were no other reason why Americans think of themselves merely as a country or nation, never as a race, we might expect this explanation to become invalid with time! we might expect that at least the children of those who so compromise would consider their way of life at last settled and traditional, and their

AMERICAN CHARACTER

ideals as beginning to be racial. It does not appear, however, that any traditions are growing in the United States, nor does the promise of any show itself even at this moment when the idea of nationality has become with us, as with other people, a living force.

The truth is, that if Americans were to let their minds dwell on their personal or family history, upon the places in which their family life began, our whole country would be aching with homesickness. The end of most philosophies is to enable men to live happily with the facts that particularly affect them. We have evolved a philosophy which enables us to live cheerfully with the great American fact that all of us have left the house, and most of us the city, where we were born. This is obviously true of the immigrant; it is equally true of the New Englanders who have moved west, of the southerners

AMERICAN CHARACTER

who have moved north, and of the westerners who have come to eastern cities.

The American man or woman who at the age of thirty is still living in the house in which he or she was born is hard indeed to find. The average soldier in the French army during the war might easily have come from a family hearth which had burned continuously for a hundred or a hundred and fifty years. Of the American army probably no more than two or three per cent. were living at the time of their enlistment in the home of their birth. Their families had come recently from Europe or else they had moved about in the United States. The causes of this moving are interesting, but not for the moment important; the important thing is that when an American thinks of his country he does not think of the soil, nor of the homestead, nor of his inherited language, for to do so would

AMERICAN CHARACTER

be to cultivate retrospect and regret; rather he thinks of the ideals for which his country stands, of the future, of that world of affections in which he instinctively recognizes a career for himself and a common meeting-place with his fellows.

Is the American, then, an idealist? He certainly is so in the sense that he lives in the world of prospects and hopes. Therefore he is willing to rebuild his cities with that incessant tearing up of streets and remodeling of houses which to the European is a nightmare orgy of change. If he has a vision of any improvement which could be made in his boyhood home, and if he can find the means, the house is probably doomed. Only a few churches in America, and no other buildings, may be warranted safe against this passion for bringing the world up to date. Colleges and universities in the United States perhaps conserve more pious memories than

AMERICAN CHARACTER

any other kind of public institution, yet some of our large universities have transported themselves bodily to a new site, with the result that the alumni who return to venerate Alma Mater must thereafter do so strictly in the world of imagination, paying homage to an idea, since there remains on the campus neither stick nor stone with power to recall a single minute of their youth. In these removals the motive is a true idealism, an imagining of the university in a large and eternal world, together with the will to realize the dream; the accomplishment, however, is perhaps a bit troubling, since a shrine abandoned will send its own petitions after the departing worshipers.

The American habit of living in a world of prospects and hopes is still more troubling in an individual who happens to be provincial in culture. Not only will he seem lacking in the humane tra-

AMERICAN CHARACTER

dition, as indeed he will be lacking in it, but he will seem perhaps contemptuous of it to a degree that shocks or annoys the European. Of Americanism in this phase Dickens gave a portrait—of the apparently boastful, exaggerating, shallow Americanism. Perhaps Dickens failed to understand the great effort by which citizens of the United States resolve not to think tenderly of the things they or their fathers have put behind them. Americans of British descent have loved Dickens for his portrait of the English life from which they have gone out; yet even such Americans will rarely permit themselves to speak of Englishmen as their British cousins and never of England as their home. So the Italians in the States, or the immigrants of any other nationality, are careful not to speak of their Italian sky or of the other particular heaven of their boyhood as though they

AMERICAN CHARACTER

still had a place under it; such memories they cut off, more or less, in order to share without reserve in the enterprise of the new world. Of course, since we elect to live in the future, we give the impression of a tendency to boast, but when we speak of the future we are discoursing upon the only part of our history which we all have in common. We are merely expressing with energy the dreams and the hopes which are the fabric of our present moment, and at times we are merely whistling for courage to walk on with so little guidance from the customs and habits of our fathers.

It took courage to pull up by the roots a family in Denmark or in Italy or in Serbia, let us say, and to transplant it to a new world. Such a family settling in central Massachusetts, for example, must repeat several times the equivalent of the first uprooting; since even though the

AMERICAN CHARACTER

family itself does not move, its neighbors will, and the Irish settler will be succeeded by the Polish until each original family is once more isolated among people of other backgrounds. Or if the family simply remains, the new generation will surround it with new traits. Many a novel is written on this theme in the United States to-day—stories of the Americanization of this family or that, where the Americanization consists largely of breaking away from the elder generation and becoming proportionately optimistic. The change is usually effected by education; it is no wonder that the small schoolhouse is so often a shrine of gratitude—often a gratitude mingled with melancholy, for here the culture of the past has been used, not to recover the past, but to get free of it. To the foreigner, no matter how friendly, our harping upon a brilliant future is perhaps, as

AMERICAN CHARACTER

we said, a form of boastfulness, but to the American it seems rather a form of prayer, a telling of beads, and we can hear in it, as in American music, a wistful note; we are conscious of caring too much about the future and too little about the past; we should like to know at any moment whether the frail structure of our dreams is settling down to some contact with some foundation, and whether we are at least walking on our own feet on the ground.

Our seeming optimism is most blatant when our culture is most defective, but even when the American is at home in the older world he will prize it chiefly for its usefulness to him and his fellows, for bringing their dreams to earth. The crowds of Americans who toured Europe in the years before the war had little antiquarian or historic interest in what they saw. They looked upon European archi-

AMERICAN CHARACTER

✓ tecture only as seeing what they might use at home; if the Coliseum reappeared in the Yale bowl, and the Gothic cathedrals were freshly translated into the Woolworth building, then those ancient monuments justified themselves. The Old World belonged to them, they thought—Westminster Abbey, for illustration, was to them as much American as English. We did not build it; but then, neither did the present inhabitants of London. The people who built it are dead. The Abbey is the possession of those who revere it. The same point of view is the secret of Longfellow's charm for his countrymen, and perhaps for other readers as well. When he translated, or even when he gave his original self, he was conveying home for the American the usable parts of European literature. Here best is found an explanation of his currency even among

AMERICAN CHARACTER

those writers abroad who recognized how much he had copied from their national poetry; for, accommodating the poems to the American people, he had substituted in them for the enjoyment of history the American wistfulness, and this substitution gave him originality with the European reader. If we were to seek another example of the discrimination the American temperament makes even when it can appreciate the older culture, we might point to the contrast between our present neglect of Greek language and literature and our present great interest in Greek dancing. With us Greek language and literature have long been taught chiefly if not entirely as vehicles of a tradition. Even if we learned to read Greek, we saw no opportunity for doing anything with that difficult accomplishment. Greek dancing, however, gave us an opportunity to dance. You may say if you choose

AMERICAN CHARACTER

that neither Athenian nor Spartan nor Theban ever danced as does the American who imitates the Greeks; the average American, however, is by preference without archæological conscience, and for him the choice is easy between the way he likes to dance and the way the Greeks may be thought to have liked to do so.

To say that even the cultured American is interested in culture only for what it will avail him to-morrow; that he does not permit himself the retrospects of history; to say that the average American uproots himself from the place of his birth and of his boyhood, that he crushes down all race memories and boasts only of his future—to say this is, of course, to exaggerate. In certain parts of the United States, in Virginia and Massachusetts for example, pride of race and pride of the hearth does from time to

AMERICAN CHARACTER

time become eloquent in the old families. Even those of us who were not born in those states enjoy and encourage such eloquence as being a somewhat quaint exhibition of our national imagination; but at the same time our instinctive answer to this tendency is to make fun of it. Boston is indeed a city of culture, but since Boston is aware of the fact, its culture is for other Americans a theme of good-natured jest. This defense against an incipient pride of locality or pride of ancestry is not new with us; we have always made it. Irving wrote his *History of Dietrich Knickerbocker* as comment upon a serious history of the Dutch settlers in New York. Similarly David Gamut in Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*, and Ichabod Crane in Irving's *Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, are notable caricatures of the school-teacher who already was becoming a boasted type in New England.

AMERICAN CHARACTER

What we might think of heredity, were we an older society, we do not know; at present, however, we are inclined to judge a man by his future—by the record his son is likely to make rather than by the record his father made. This is quite literally true; in small villages and in cities alike the son of a distinguished father is fatally handicapped if he shows any disposition to remember whose son he is, whereas the creditable performance of a rising young man leads the neighbors to observe that he must have been well brought up. We might add that if the American lacks reverence for his elders, he is extremely attentive to children.

2

Even though this point of view may be exaggerated, it explains many things which otherwise the foreigner must misunderstand in the American, or must,

AMERICAN CHARACTER

what is perhaps worse, entirely overlook in him. It explains, for example, the great difference between what an American means when he talks of liberty and what an Englishman or a Frenchman means by the same word. The European who desires liberty takes for granted at the same time a tradition which is itself a check upon too great freedom; in matters of art and conduct tradition enters his character as an endowment of taste. But when the American speaks of liberty he has no idea of any check placed by any tradition upon his desire to do as he pleases. Liberty, as he conceives of it, is an opportunity to experiment, and his freedom will in the end be limited only by the hard lesson which experience may enforce. It was not by accident that the philosophy of pragmatism evolved itself in the United States, the philosophy which relegated truth itself to experi-

AMERICAN CHARACTER

ment, and in which, for all its cheerfulness, taste is at a discount. Perhaps it is a reason for distrusting pragmatism that it is the social expression of a nation which, from force of circumstances, has given up having a past, and to some extent has ceased to be guided by taste.

Perhaps it may seem too severe a criticism of any people to charge them with a wholesale lack of taste. Yet taste involves always a sense of chronology; perhaps also a sense of geography; and these senses are the result of a certain studious respect for what men have done before us, and for the particular ends to which, by experience, they learned to adapt particular needs. As yet the American fails somewhat to reap this profit from the past. The tourist who sees some effect of Moorish architecture and on the same trip to Europe feels the charm of an English cottage, is not unlikely, provided

AMERICAN CHARACTER

he has the means, to incorporate his memory of both styles of architecture into his house at home. Some of our most exciting achievements in architecture have been so reached. We can not argue with the perpetrator of these mixtures, since by his philosophy of life they are not mixtures after all, but simply quotations from one unique source, the past.

Nor can we easily teach the young American to feel a nearer interest in Benjamin Franklin, let us say, than in Julius Cæsar; in either case he is overwhelmed with the misfortune the distinguished character suffers, in being dead. To all Americans, old or young, the past is a great negation, the infinite gulf in which dead things are swallowed up, and in eternity all the dead of all the ages are contemporaries. Therefore if the builder of the village house mixes his Moorish and English architecture, he justifies

AMERICAN CHARACTER

himself with the conviction that both styles were brought from Europe, and Europe is some place outside of America from which useful things can from time to time be resurrected. Similarly it is easy for the schoolboy, and indeed for the grown man in the United States, to refer quite indiscriminately to George Washington, to Homer, to David, and to Barnum in a juxtaposition which makes the European gasp; for these men are alike dead, and the American has carefully avoided that meticulous acquaintance with the past which makes one sensitive to chronology or to category.

It is not the uneducated American of whom I am now speaking. The best illustration of this attitude toward the past is the poet-philosopher who perhaps is the most American of all our writers, R. W. Emerson. The English reviewers who found themselves bewildered by his

AMERICAN CHARACTER

indifference to chronology, disposed of his early books with polite amazement or with contempt, according to their individual way of dealing with incomprehensible things. "Life has no memory," they read in the great essay on *Experience*, and in the first lovely book on *Nature* they were told that time is illusion, and in almost every page of Emerson they were taught that time is only a method of thought, and that man is great as he emancipates himself from respect for other lands or other ages than his own. In almost every page they came upon lists of books or names of cities which seemed purposely disordered for an effect of humor; the inventories for which Walt Whitman has been assailed are only a moderate exaggeration of Emerson's. That Briton of common sense and not too great imagination, Thomas Hughes, was moved to register his conviction that Em-

AMERICAN CHARACTER

erson was a glittering impostor—much as a modern reader might accuse a clever man in our own day of catching the public ear with silly eccentricities.

But Emerson was singularly sincere and as far as possible from desiring to get attention by a trick. He was, however, American, and if we are to decide that indifference to the past is a weakness in the American character, then Emerson cultivated that weakness with all his heart. When he substituted his theology of an oversoul for the orthodox conception of God, he wished to do more than change the name of his deity. He wished to conceive of the soul as breathed through by an eternal force, equally wise, equally loving in all ages. Provided this oversoul inspire us, there is no need for study or for previous experience. "The soul circumscribes all things," he said, "it predicts all experience, in like manner it

AMERICAN CHARACTER

subtends time and space." When we are inspired, we are great men; without that inspiration we are dead, though we know history ever so thoroughly. In other words, Emerson was conceiving of a God who should be a substitute for the past, and who would make a knowledge of the past unnecessary. Such a God the Hebrew Jehovah was not. We must not seem to give the impression that the Americans of to-day who have the same point of view are necessarily followers of Emerson; many of them of course neglect to read him. But he is the true expression of his country's temperament, and is likely to remain so for many a year.

At Emerson's old home, Concord, a friend of mine recently found, in an American audience gathered to hear him lecture, a curious confirmation of the American detachment from the past. The idea of lecturing at Concord at the

AMERICAN CHARACTER

home of the philosopher, of Hawthorne and of Thoreau, almost on the site of the little battle-field which had for the United States such momentous consequences, inspired my friend to such feeling of the past as a European would understand. When he faced his audience, however, he realized that most of them must have come to the United States since the Civil War, and that their interest in the old revolutionary skirmish and in the writers who once lived in the village was just about as immediate as their interest in Marathon or in the home of the obelisk-makers. My friend, telling me the story, said like a good American, "After all, they are quite right. Why live in the past?" I do not know whether he realized how near he was to quoting Emerson himself—"Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criti-

AMERICAN CHARACTER

cism. The foregoing generations beheld God and Nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? . . . Why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship." The American boys called to France in our armies were few of them studious readers of Emerson, but most of them were of his school of thought. It was only for the sake of the future, after all, that they willingly engaged so deeply in what seemed to them the tragic result of a long past. Finding themselves hailed by friendly English comrades as cousins in blood, they learned as quickly as possible to

AMERICAN CHARACTER

conceal their astonishment; to many of them the remark was merely a compulsion to think for the first time of the stock from which they came—usually not an Anglo-Saxon stock. Arriving in France, they found themselves greeted with an extraordinary gratitude which implied something done in the past of which they were not aware. Upon inquiry they found that they were received as America's gift in return for Lafayette. Many of them, with the best disposition to be *au courant*, asked at once, Who was Lafayette? Some of them must have been disappointed to know that he died so long ago. All of them were really more interested in Marshal Foch.

The American philosophy that I have been here setting forth may explain also the American attitude toward the Germans, which in some respects differs slightly from the French or the British

AMERICAN CHARACTER

attitude. Even if Germany had not forced the United States to fight, the demonstration which Germans gave us in the United States that they had not after all abandoned their own past, would have been a matter of concern for all Americans conscious of the American philosophy. We had looked upon the Germans, cherishing in our midst their love of old customs, much as we looked upon the Scotch in various communities, as eminently loyal citizens of the new world, who yet affectionately retained an antiquarian interest in the country of their origin. We found a certain charm in their memory of the old country, simply because the American so rarely exhibits any memory at all of the past; we did not suspect that tradition among the Germans was a thing more real than among those Massachusetts or Virginia families of which I have spoken, where a

AMERICAN CHARACTER

good-humored fashion makes something of the ancestors of the house. The early years of the war showed us, however, that some of our German neighbors had never given up their past, that they therefore had never become one with the other Americans, and that they seemed to wish no share in our future. If the other racial elements which have come to our shores should disclose a similar tendency in moments of stress, our great experiment in the new world would be obviously a failure. We feel that the war has proved, certainly for all other racial elements except the Germans, that the experiment is not a failure; as for the Germans, it has proved, we think, that some of them wish to have little part with us, and that those of them who are Americans at heart will make the typical American sacrifice, and drop their past altogether.

AMERICAN CHARACTER

3

Any study of American character to-day that would arrive at the truth must, I think, face frankly, as I here have tried to do, the extent to which the citizen of the United States, at least in the present generation, lives without a sense of the past. What America may become is perhaps suggested by the consciousness that most thoughtful Americans begin to have of the shortcomings in the national character—the shortcomings that result from this exclusive emphasis upon the future. More than any other nation that has played an important rôle in the world, we are without a sense of the soil; we quite literally live in a world of ideas, we quite literally get along somehow without a practical reckoning of time and space. We have developed a top-heavy way of life. When we speak of the home, since

AMERICAN CHARACTER

we have no sense of the local hearth as a Frenchman has, nor of the place from which our ancestors came as the British colonist has, we are forced to think of the world of ideas which are included in a household. The people for whom we have the household affection make up all that we know of home. To take this attitude toward life may be indeed to take an ideal attitude, but we begin to have among us here and there certain lonely philosophers, Professor George Santayana for example, who remind us that ideals must have roots in natural facts, and that to live merely in sentiments and affections is to follow a thin and perhaps a dangerous kind of existence. We wonder from time to time how long it will be before the readjustment which at present seems continuously needed in the United States will bring us to some point of stability, where our affections may

AMERICAN CHARACTER

begin to attach themselves to quite earthly and natural shrines.

If the United States were really a melting-pot, we should expect our people, coming as they do from all races, to represent as it were the sum total of what all races might contribute to the common wealth of humanity. We might expect, therefore, to find in the United States much art, fine science and a noble poetry. That has indeed been the expectation of optimistic Americans, and the expectation has furnished the text for much comment from critical foreigners, who upon visiting our shores have marveled, perhaps with an inward satisfaction after all, that a country so new and supposedly full of energy should have as yet disclosed so meager an utterance in things of the spirit. The fact is, however, that a nation which has dropped its past has thereby dropped the instruments of expression.

AMERICAN CHARACTER

Language is but a series of sounds, mere groans and noises if you choose, until the ear has grown accustomed after many centuries to detect the significant shades and intonations of the specific groan. No language can be improvised, if the audience is to understand the speaker. The larger fabric of language, the racial memories to which an old country can always appeal, obviously do not exist in a land where every man is busy forgetting his past, separating himself from the memory of what his forefathers felt and said. Without tradition there can be no taste, and what is worse, there can be little for taste to act upon. We have indeed some approaches, some faint hints and suggestions of a national poetry. The cartoon figure of Uncle Sam, for example, a great poet could perhaps push over into the world of art, but unless the poet soon arrives there will be few Amer-

AMERICAN CHARACTER

icans left who can recognize in that gaunt figure the first Yankee, the keen, witty, audacious and slightly melancholy type of our countrymen as they first emerged in world history.

From among all our great men for the last two hundred years, of whom can we write a story or a poem with any expectation that the reader has heard of the man before—or, to be more generous toward the reader, with any expectation that, having heard of the man, he knows anything in particular about him? Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Daniel Boone, are names, indeed, but little more, to the American whose father reached the United States since 1864. George Washington is connected in some dim way with the story of a cherry tree, but his hatchet activity begins to be mixed up in the national memory with the fact that Lincoln is said to have split rails.

AMERICAN CHARACTER

Lincoln himself is the one national figure who remains eligible for literary uses, but it sometimes seems that for many of us he is only the representative in later costume of the cartoon figure of Uncle Sam. The attempts which poets have made and are making in the United States to begin a national literature are among the most interesting and pathetic in the history of art—pathetic because few of them remember what must precede art, a good store of legend or history which the poet can draw upon and turn to emotional value. To speak of Trafalgar or of Blenheim to an Englishman is to stir an emotion already prepared, but in America to speak of the *Merrimac* and the *Monitor*, or of Vicksburg or of Valley Forge is simply to stir memories of the schoolroom in which the children of the newcomer tried to remember many facts of like importance and alike removed from his in-

AMERICAN CHARACTER

terest, since they all were embedded in a past, whether of Egypt or of England or of his own country.

We have thought that the recent war might indeed mark the beginning of such national memories as would make for us a national art. Yet that hope may be frustrated; for we dreamed of a similar beginning after the Civil War, while northerner and southerner could understand any reference to Stonewall Jackson or Robert Lee, while in New England even to the end of the nineteenth century most citizens could appreciate the wonderful monument which St. Gaudens made of Robert Gould Shaw. To-day, however, so many Bostonians happen to have been born in Italy that the figure of the young officer riding with his negro regiment is likely to suggest almost anything except a common tradition. So far as art is concerned, our task in America

AMERICAN CHARACTER

is to make the country a true melting-pot, to turn into a common heritage something of what each race brings to us of race memory and of race aptitude for beautiful things. We are disturbed to observe that the Italian who arrives among us with a fresh and apparently inexhaustible passion for color and design becomes in the second generation a mere American, as poor in language as the rest of us; that in time the music-loving Russian forgets his gift, and that our own native Indian dies rapidly, leaving in our culture too slight a trace of his extraordinary sense of rhythm and color and design. All of us, in conceding something for the sake of a common understanding, have conceded so much that we have little left in common to understand.

If our lack of a past handicaps us in the matter of art, it handicaps us also in manners, since manners are themselves an

AMERICAN CHARACTER

art. Those societies which have a traditional behavior have manners; other societies must improvise their behavior as they go along. If the American seems impromptu in his ways, it is really remarkable that he does not seem even more so, since outside of the individual home or the particular part of the given city in which he may reside he is subject to no formulas of behavior, and if he has manners he is likely to suggest to his countrymen that he is imitating the foreigner. You may talk or walk or may conduct a drawing-room conversation in an English way, in a French way, in an Italian way, or in a German way; but it would be a bold critic who, after knowing America, would say just what is the American way of doing these things, since Americans on the whole do those and other things each as he pleases. There may seem at first sight little reason to object to a sponta-

AMERICAN CHARACTER

neity of manner which has managed to slough off much impedimenta and to have brought to the fore instinctive friendliness and unveiled sincerity. But there are other uses of behavior than merely to seem amiable; manners become at times vitally significant as language, and it is difficult indeed to speak with manners as with any other form of discourse unless the hearer is conversant with the particular tongue. In manners then, as in art, the occasional American who cares thoughtfully for his country's future, is at this moment considering by what means we may conserve, in one blended language which all of us may speak and understand, the total contribution of all the races that come to us.

Aside from the field of art, one might expect that a country which starts fresh, which stands on its own feet, which considers every man equal to every other

AMERICAN CHARACTER

provided he is honest and sincere and loyal to his neighbor, which reminds itself frequently that the world began when each one of us was born—it might be expected that such a country would achieve something clear and original in philosophy. Are not the old countries too much encumbered with problems raised by the fume of dialectic controversy? Would not a group of men beginning with the maturity of manhood and yet with the unembarrassed vision of children, see life at least somewhat as it is? This has indeed been our American hope, and our characteristic prophet has held it out to us as an ideal, lending much transcendental color to the argument. Professor Santayana, in our own day, the most subtle of our philosophers, has preached it with infinite charm and persuasion. Yet being an astute critic of life, he observes that the citizen of the United States is

AMERICAN CHARACTER

so busy making himself agreeable to his neighbors by discarding traditional prejudices, and incidentally, perhaps, traditional inspirations, that his last state is not one of clear vision but of a vague diffused feeling. He is not preeminently an admirer of intelligence. He is in love with morality, which he interprets as a high state of feeling rather than as a considered course of conduct. There is here a difference between the moral sense of England and that of the United States; in England, if one may judge by the record of a long line of poets and prose writers, it is less in a man's favor that he should be intelligent than that he should be good, but in the United States it seems less in a man's favor that he should act well than that he should feel strongly about good conduct or that others should feel strongly about his conduct. We reduce as many of our prob-

AMERICAN CHARACTER

lems as possible to this kind of moral question. Our political contests frequently resolve into a debate as to whether the candidate is or is not a good man, and the party which rises to the highest temperature of emotion wins—all this without much regard for the particular problem which the good man who is felt to be good by a majority of his countrymen will thereafter be called on to solve. Perhaps this extraordinary expression of feeling in matters of moral concern is an exhibition of racial sentiment otherwise repressed. Is the idea too fantastic? Man's heart must rest on something solid, and the Decalogue will serve as a floating island in the world of ideas until we come to a broader and more firmly anchored territory.

The tendency to set character above everything else, this sentimentality, if I may call it so frankly, is not peculiar to

AMERICAN CHARACTER

any one race-strain in the total American complex; it characterizes all of us. Walt Whitman was truly American in his expression of diffuse and indiscriminate amiability. William James is truly American in putting an optimistic mood at the service of all his countrymen. It was a typical American who recently wrote to a serious journal in the United States complaining of the education given in our colleges, that it was too exclusively devoted to the training of the mind. Among all the faults attributable to our educational system, this special charge, that we trained the mind, we surely did not expect to hear. The danger of too great amiability is not merely that in the world of intelligence it makes us blind to those problems which can be solved only by intelligence, problems of pure mechanics or of pure physics or of economics, but that even in the world of

AMERICAN CHARACTER

emotion it ends at last by depriving us of standards, so that once we feel kindly toward the conduct and ideas of other men, we shortly are well-disposed to their feelings also. If it took a long time for the United States to orient itself in the World War, the cause should perhaps be sought not only in our detachment from European affairs but more profoundly in our lack of common standards by which to judge conduct of any sort. The service of the war to us may prove in the end to be chiefly this, that we have limited the area of experience in which we are willing to measure things solely by an amiable disposition.

A foreigner expects of the American not only a new art and a new intelligence, but also great energy, great genius for machinery, and a faculty for organization. Even if he fails to discover the art and the intelligence, he usually decides

AMERICAN CHARACTER

that the American indeed has the mechanical or the organizing gift. The American, himself, however, is rather surprised at this verdict. Why should he be praised for his machines? The fact is that he sets little store by them, and merely wonders in his turn why the foreigner does not avail himself of the same simple aids toward comfort. Much as the American has been accused of loving luxury, he really does not value merely comfortable or useful things, but in a world where it is easy to have comfort he wonders what great virtue there would be in going without it. Grave danger there is in organization, as the American is aware; he knows that society has not yet found the right adjustment of machinery to human comfort and leisure; he knows that we may become slaves in some degree to the instruments we created for our convenience; but he also knows that this peril

AMERICAN CHARACTER

is not peculiarly American. The difference between him and the European, as he sees it, is that the European fears to use any machinery, and he does not. He fears no loss in human dignity if he substitutes a mechanical street-sweeper for a row of laboring men. It seems to him that if the machine can clear away the mud, then sweeping the streets is no fit work for a human being. He can not see that the invention and the use of machines is any great credit to him nor any sign, as the foreigner so often interprets it to be, that his heart is set on material things. He cares little for money, though he happens to live in a fortunate land where money is comparatively easy to win. It is on this subject that he is most sensitive as far as Europe is concerned, since the foreigner who gives him lectures on his too feverish pursuit of gold has in many cases come to America to make

AMERICAN CHARACTER

money by the lecture. At least by his own account the foreigner does not come out of admiration of American art or of American science.

The American wonders also why Europe does not recognize his extraordinary preoccupation with ideas. His wars have been fought for ideas, his universities are debating grounds of new ideas, he rebuilds his cities at great inconvenience in order to carry out his latest idea, and he will exchange all the gold he has for any idea which almost any European brings him. The latest success in French philosophy or British thought, the newly risen artist on the European stage, is likely to find his first and largest audience in the United States, and the puzzled American when he reads an English criticism of the low state of our intellectual life, frequently wonders whether British idealism has reached such perfection that

AMERICAN CHARACTER

it would not notice the difference if all the American purchasers of British books and patrons of British art were to withdraw their support. He is puzzled at the greeting accorded by the foreign press when he invests all the money he has in some ancient and priceless work of art. What better use could he put money to than to buy with it the lovely tapestry, the Rubens, or the DaVinci which he admires? To his great surprise he is accused of robbing British art if he buys a Rubens, or British literature if he is willing to pay more than any one else for a manuscript of Burns. He would be accused of robbing French art if he managed to purchase the *Venus de Milo*. The two questions that perplex him are: first, why a portrait of Rubens or of Rembrandt should be more British than American; and, second, why he should be thought to have done something ignoble

AMERICAN CHARACTER

if he pays more for the manuscript of a British poet than any British citizen is willing to pay? What Americans really think about art, to what their hearts are really given in this world as between material accomplishment and the things of the spirit, can not yet be judged by their own product in art or in literature or even in science, for our nation by forgetting its past has temporarily sacrificed the ability to accomplish great things in the world of expression. But if we have thrown overboard our past, it has been in order to make the greatest of all experiments in human brotherhood. Where we do set our scale of values and where we shall set them when we once have a common background out of which to make a great art of our own, has been witnessed for a long time in the shrines of European poets which American subscriptions have helped to maintain, in the monuments to

AMERICAN CHARACTER

great artists, and in the annual pilgrimages abroad which all of us make—not the rich only, but every one of us who can by any sacrifice find the means to travel.

4

In such times as these when wise men scrutinize with vigor even the things they love best, it would not be profitable for an American, writing either for his people or for the foreign reader, to praise his own country much. Yet I suppose the last mystery in the American character which should be exposed to the foreigner is the reason why Americans, having so little tradition, do after all love their country. What began with us as a necessity has become a conviction and a hope—our faith that it is possible for man to begin again and to win an unprejudiced future. We believe that the men who arrive by the thousands from older

AMERICAN CHARACTER

shores to be our comrades may, in changing from the discipline of Europe to the freedom of our land, succeed in a new statement of human perfection. This has long been our hope; it was expressed for us in many a great sentence of Lincoln, in many a stirring line of Whitman, and in many a paragraph of Emerson. "Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house a world; and beyond its world a heaven. Know then, that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only can we see. All that Adam had, all that Cæsar could, you have and can do. Adam called his house heaven and earth; Cæsar called his house Rome; you perhaps call yours a cobbler's trade, a hundred acres of plowed land, or a scholar's garret. Yet line for line and point for point, your domain is as great as theirs, though without fine names. Build, there-

AMERICAN CHARACTER

fore, your own world." If you were to stand at the dock and read such words as these to each shipload of immigrants, you would merely be putting into language the hope that brings them. If you were to read these words to their children and to their grandchildren, you would still be expressing what they have come to love in the United States, and what they believe can best be achieved there.

Meanwhile our task is to make a common past of our own—not so much of the past, we hope, as to shackle us, but just enough of the past to talk with, to give us a language for art, for poetry, to give us a proper vehicle for our emotions. We would relate our idealism at last to the facts beneath our feet. We would have a philosophy which begins in a clear understanding of the world around us, and finds in that world intelligent means to reach ideal ends. We believe that by

AMERICAN CHARACTER

education the vast majority of men can be made capable of this development. Our faith has been immensely strengthened by what we saw in our army in Europe, regiment upon regiment of all races and all languages, yet all American and loyal. Loyal to what? To their ideal of a country where race does not count. They came home, we believe, with discriminating admiration for what they had seen of the great qualities of their allies. They had been at school. They had had a glimpse of that international sphere in which the nations will some day practise unselfishness. But they brought back no great love for the past—only indeed for the beautiful things out of the past, the things of art which we have always loved in the United States, and which seem to belong not to time at all.

BOOK II

THE MORAL OBLIGATION TO
BE INTELLIGENT

THE MORAL OBLIGATION TO BE INTELLIGENT

I

IF a wise man should ask, What are the modern virtues? and should answer his own question by a summary of the things we admire; if he should discard as irrelevant the ideals which by tradition we profess, but which are not found outside of the tradition or the profession—ideals like meekness, humility, the renunciation of this world; if he should include only those excellences to which our hearts are daily given, and by which our conduct is motivated,—in such an inventory what virtues would he name?

THE MORAL OBLIGATION

This question is neither original nor very new. Our times await the reckoning up of our spiritual goods which is here suggested. We have at least this wisdom, that many of us are curious to know just what our virtues are. I wish I could offer myself as the wise man who brings the answer. But I raise this question merely to ask another—When the wise man brings his list of our genuine admirations, will intelligence be one of them? We might seem to be well within the old ideal of modesty if we claimed the virtue of intelligence. But before we claim the virtue, are we convinced that it is a virtue, not a peril?

II

The disposition to consider intelligence a peril is an old Anglo-Saxon inheritance. Our ancestors have cele-

TO BE INTELLIGENT

brated this disposition in verse and prose. Splendid as our literature is, it has not voiced all the aspirations of humanity, nor could it be expected to voice an aspiration that has not characteristically belonged to the English race; the praise of intelligence is not one of its characteristic glories.

“Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever.”

Here is the startling alternative which to the English, alone among great nations, has been not startling but a matter of course. Here is the casual assumption that a choice must be made between goodness and intelligence; that stupidity is first cousin to moral conduct, and cleverness the first step into mischief; that reason and God are not on good terms with each other; that the mind and the heart are rival buckets in the well of truth, inexorably balanced—full

THE MORAL OBLIGATION

mind, starved heart—stout heart, weak head.

Kingsley's line is a convenient text, but to establish the point that English literature voices a traditional distrust of the mind we must go to the masters. In Shakspeare's plays there are some highly intelligent men, but they are either villains or tragic victims. To be as intelligent as Richard or Iago or Edmund seems to involve some break with goodness; to be as wise as Prospero seems to imply some Faust-like traffic with the forbidden world; to be as thoughtful as Hamlet seems to be too thoughtful to live. In Shakspeare the prizes of life go to such men as Bassanio, or Duke Orsino, or Florizel—men of good conduct and sound character, but of no particular intelligence. There might, indeed, appear to be one general exception to this sweeping statement: Shakspeare

TO BE INTELLIGENT

does concede intelligence as a fortunate possession to some of his heroines. But upon even a slight examination those ladies, like Portia, turn out to have been among Shakspeare's Italian importations—their wit was part and parcel of the story he borrowed; or, like Viola, they are English types of humility, patience, and loyalty, such as we find in the old ballads, with a bit of Euphuism added, a foreign cleverness of speech. After all, these are only a few of Shakspeare's heroines; over against them are Ophelia, Juliet, Desdemona, Hero, Cordelia, Miranda, Perdita—lovable for other qualities than intellect,—and in a sinister group, Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra, Goneril, intelligent and wicked.

In *Paradise Lost* Milton attributes intelligence of the highest order to the devil. That this is an Anglo-Saxon reading of the infernal character may be

THE MORAL OBLIGATION

shown by a reference to the book of Job, where Satan is simply a troublesome body, and the great wisdom of the story is from the voice of God in the whirlwind. But Milton makes his Satan so thoughtful, so persistent and liberty-loving, so magnanimous, and God so illogical, so heartless and repressive, that many perfectly moral readers fear lest Milton, like the modern novelists, may have known good and evil, but could not tell them apart. It is disconcerting to intelligence that it should be God's angel who cautions Adam not to wander in the earth, nor inquire concerning heaven's causes and ends, and that it should be Satan meanwhile who questions and explores. By Milton's reckoning of intelligence the theologian and the scientist to-day alike take after Satan.

If there were time, we might trace this valuation of intelligence through the

TO BE INTELLIGENT

English novel. We should see how often the writers have distinguished between intelligence and goodness, and have enlisted our affections for a kind of inexpert virtue. In Fielding or Scott, Thackeray or Dickens, the hero of the English novel is a well-meaning blunderer who in the last chapter is temporarily rescued by the grace of God from the mess he has made of his life. Unless he also dies in the last chapter, he will probably need rescue again. The dear woman whom the hero marries is, with a few notable exceptions, rather less intelligent than himself. When David Copperfield marries Agnes, his prospects of happiness, to the eyes of intelligence, look not very exhilarating. Agnes has more sense than Dora, but it is not even for that slight distinction that we must admire her; her great qualities are of the heart—patience, humility, faithfulness. These are the qual-

THE MORAL OBLIGATION

ities also of Thackeray's good heroines, like Laura or Lady Castlewood. Beatrice Esmond and Becky Sharp, both highly intelligent, are of course a bad lot.

No less significant is the kind of emotion the English novelist invites towards his secondary or lower-class heroes—toward Mr. Boffin in *Our Mutual Friend*, for example, or Harry Foker in *Pendennis*. These characters amuse us, and we feel pleasantly superior to them, but we agree with the novelist that they are wholly admirable in their station. Yet if a Frenchman—let us say Balzac—were presenting such types, he would make us feel, as in *Père Goriot* or *Eugénie Grandet*, not only admiration for the stable, loyal nature, but also deep pity that such goodness should be so tragically bound in unintelligence or vulgarity. This comparison of racial temperaments helps us to understand ourselves. We may continue the method

TO BE INTELLIGENT

at our leisure. What would Socrates have thought of Mr. Pickwick, or the Vicar of Wakefield, or David Copperfield, or Arthur Pendennis? For that matter, would he have felt admiration or pity for Colonel Newcome?

III

I hardly need confess that this is not an adequate account of English literature. Let me hasten to say that I know the reader is resenting this somewhat cavalier handling of the noble writers he loves. He probably is wondering how I can expect to increase his love of literature by such unsympathetic remarks. But just now I am not concerned about our love of literature; I take it for granted, and use it as an instrument to prod us with. If we love Shakspeare and Milton and Scott and

THE MORAL OBLIGATION

Dickens and Thackeray, and yet do not know what qualities their books hold out for our admiration, then—let me say it as delicately as possible—our admiration is not discriminating; and if we neither have discrimination nor are disturbed by our lack of it, then perhaps that wise man could not list intelligence among our virtues. Certainly it would be but a silly account of English literature to say only that it set little store by the things of the mind. I am aware that for the sake of my argument I have exaggerated, by insisting upon only one aspect of English literature. But our history betrays a peculiar warfare between character and intellect, such as to the Greek, for example, would have been incomprehensible. The great Englishman, like the most famous Greeks, had intelligence as well as character, and was at ease with them both. But whereas

TO BE INTELLIGENT

the notable Greek seems typical of his race, the notable Englishman usually seems an exception to his own people, and is often best appreciated in other lands. What is more singular—in spite of the happy combination in himself of character and intelligence, he often fails to recognize the value of that combination in his neighbors. When Shakspeare portrayed such amateurish statesmen as the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, Burleigh was guiding Elizabeth's empire, and Francis Bacon was soon to be King James's counsellor. It was the young Milton who pictured the life of reason in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, the most spiritual fruit of philosophy in *Comus*; and when he wrote his epic he was probably England's most notable example of that intellectual inquiry and independence which in his great poem he discouraged. There remain several well-known figures in our

THE MORAL OBLIGATION

literary history who have both possessed and believed in intelligence—Byron and Shelley in what seems our own day, Edmund Spenser before Shakspeare's time. England has more or less neglected all three, but they must in fairness be counted to her credit. Some excuse might be offered for the neglect of Byron and Shelley by a nation that likes the proprieties; but the gentle Spenser, the noblest philosopher and most chivalrous gentleman in our literature, seems to be unread only because he demands a mind as well as a heart used to high things.

This will be sufficient qualification of any disparagement of English literature; no people and no literature can be great that are not intelligent, and England has produced not only statesmen and scientists of the first order, but also poets in whom the soul was fitly mated with a lofty intellect. But I am asking you to

TO BE INTELLIGENT

reconsider your reading in history and fiction, to reflect whether our race has usually thought highly of the intelligence by which it has been great; I suggest these non-intellectual aspects of our literature as commentary upon my question—and all this with the hope of pressing upon you the question as to what *you* think of intelligence.

Those of us who frankly prefer character to intelligence are therefore not without precedent. If we look beneath the history of the English people, beneath the ideas expressed in our literature, we find in the temper of our remotest ancestors a certain bias which still prescribes our ethics and still prejudices us against the mind. The beginnings of our conscience can be geographically located. It began in the German forests, and it gave its allegiance not to the intellect but to the will. Whether or

THE MORAL OBLIGATION

not the severity of life in a hard climate raised the value of that persistence by which alone life could be preserved, the Germans as Tacitus knew them, and the Saxons as they landed in England, held as their chief virtue that will-power which makes character. For craft or strategy they had no use; they were already a bulldog race; they liked fighting, and they liked best to settle the matter hand to hand. The admiration for brute force which naturally accompanied this ideal of self-reliance, drew with it as naturally a certain moral sanction. A man was as good as his word, and he was ready to back up his word with a blow. No German, Tacitus says, would enter into a treaty of public or private business without his sword in his hand. When this emphasis upon the will became a social emphasis, it gave the direction to ethical feeling. Honor lay

TO BE INTELLIGENT

in a man's integrity, in his willingness and ability to keep his word; therefore the man became more important than his word or deed. Words and deeds were then easily interpreted, not in terms of absolute good and evil, but in terms of the man behind them. The deeds of a bad man were bad; the deeds of a good man were good. Fielding wrote *Tom Jones* to show that a good man sometimes does a bad action, consciously or unconsciously, and a bad man sometimes does good, intentionally or unintentionally. From the fact that *Tom Jones* is still popularly supposed to be as wicked as it is coarse, we may judge that Fielding did not convert all his readers. Some progress certainly has been made; we do not insist that the more saintly of two surgeons shall operate on us for appendicitis. But as a race we seem as far as possible from realising that an

THE MORAL OBLIGATION

action can intelligently be called good only if it contributes to a good end; that it is the moral obligation of an intelligent creature to find out as far as possible whether a given action leads to a good or a bad end; and that any system of ethics that excuses him from that obligation is vicious. If I give you poison, meaning to give you wholesome food, I have—to say the least—not done a good act; and unless I intend to throw overboard all pretence to intelligence, I must feel some responsibility for that trifling neglect to find out whether what I gave you was food or poison.

Obvious as the matter is in this academic illustration, it ought to have been still more obvious in Matthew Arnold's famous plea for culture. The purpose of culture, he said, is "to make reason and the will of God prevail." This formula he quoted from an English-

TO BE INTELLIGENT

man. Differently stated, the purpose of culture, he said, is "to make an intelligent being yet more intelligent." This formula he borrowed from a Frenchman. The basis culture must have in character, the English resolution to make reason and the will of God prevail, Arnold took for granted; no man ever set a higher price on character—so far as character by itself will go. But he spent his life trying to sow a little suspicion that before we can make the will of God prevail we must find out what is the will of God.

I doubt if Arnold taught us much. He merely embarrassed us temporarily. Our race has often been so embarrassed when it has turned a sudden corner and come upon intelligence. Charles Kingsley himself, who would rather be good than clever,—and had his wish,—was temporarily embarrassed when in the consciousness of his own upright char-

THE MORAL OBLIGATION

acter he publicly called Newman a liar. Newman happened to be intelligent as well as good, and Kingsley's discomfiture is well known. But we discovered long ago how to evade the sudden embarrassments of intelligence. "Toll for the brave," sings the poet for those who went down in the *Royal George*. They were brave. But he might have sung, "Toll for the stupid." In order to clean the hull, brave Kempenfelt and his eight hundred heroes took the serious risk of laying the vessel well over on its side, while most of the crew were below. Having made the error, they all died bravely; and our memory passes easily over the lack of a virtue we never did think much of, and dwells on the English virtues of courage and discipline. So we forget the shocking blunder of the charge of the Light Brigade, and proudly sing the heroism of the victims. Lest

TO BE INTELLIGENT

we flatter ourselves that this trick of defence has departed with our fathers—this reading of stupidity in terms of the tragic courage that endures its results—let us reflect that recently, after full warning, we drove a ship at top speed through a field of icebergs. When we were thrilled to read how superbly those hundreds died, in the great English way, a man pointed out that they did indeed die in the English way, and that our pride was therefore ill-timed; that all that bravery was wasted; that the tragedy was in the shipwreck of intelligence. That discouraging person was an Irishman.

IV

I have spoken of our social inheritance as though it were entirely English. Once more let me qualify my terms. Even

THE MORAL OBLIGATION

those ancestors of ours who never left Great Britain were heirs of many civilizations—Roman, French, Italian, Greek. With each world-tide some love of pure intelligence was washed up on English shores, and enriched the soil, and here and there the old stock marvelled at its own progeny. But to America, much as we may sentimentally deplore it, England seems destined to be less and less the source of culture, of religion and learning. Our land assimilates all races; with every ship in the harbor our old English ways of thought must crowd a little closer to make room for a new tradition. If some of us do not greatly err, these newcomers are chiefly driving to the wall our inherited criticism of the intellect. As surely as the severe northern climate taught our forefathers the value of the will, the social conditions from which these new citizens have escaped

TO BE INTELLIGENT

have taught them the power of the mind. They differ from each other, but against the Anglo-Saxon they are confederated in a Greek love of knowledge, in a Greek assurance that sin and misery are the fruit of ignorance, and that to know is to achieve virtue. They join forces at once with that earlier arrival from Greece, the scientific spirit, which like all the immigrants has done our hard work and put up with our contempt. Between this rising host that follow intelligence, and the old camp that put their trust in a stout heart, a firm will, and a strong hand, the fight is on. Our college men will be in the thick of it. If they do not take sides, they will at least be battered in the scuffle. At this moment they are readily divided into those who wish to be men—whatever that means—and those who wish to be intelligent men, and those who, unconscious of blasphemy or hu-

THE MORAL OBLIGATION

mor, prefer not to be intelligent, but to do the will of God.

When we consider the nature of the problems to be solved in our day, it seems—to many of us, at least—that these un-English arrivals are correct, that intelligence is the virtue we particularly need. Courage and steadfastness we cannot do without, so long as two men dwell on the earth; but it is time to discriminate in our praise of these virtues. If you want to get out of prison, what you need is the key to the lock. If you cannot get that, have courage and steadfastness. Perhaps the modern world has got into a kind of prison, and what is needed is the key to the lock. If none of the old virtues exactly fits, why should it seem ignoble to admit it? England for centuries has got on better by sheer character than some other nations by sheer intelligence, but there is after all a

TO BE INTELLIGENT

relation between the kind of problem and the means we should select to solve it. Not all problems are solved by will-power. When England overthrew Bonaparte, it was not his intelligence she overthrew; the contest involved other things besides intelligence, and she wore him out in the matter of physical endurance. The enemy that comes to her as a visible host or armada she can still close with and throttle; but when the foe arrives as an arrow that flieth by night, what avail the old sinews, the old stoutness of heart! We Americans face the same problems, and are too much inclined to oppose to them similar obsolete armor. We make a moral issue of an economic or social question, because it seems ignoble to admit it is simply a question for intelligence. Like the medicine-man, we use oratory and invoke our hereditary divinities, when the patient

THE MORAL OBLIGATION

needs only a little quiet, or permission to get out of bed. We applaud those leaders who warm to their work—who, when they cannot open a door, threaten to kick it in. In the philosopher's words, we curse the obstacles of life as though they were devils. But they are not devils. They are obstacles.

V

Perhaps my question as to what you think of intelligence has been pushed far enough. But I cannot leave the subject without a confession of faith.

None of the reasons here suggested will quite explain the true worship of intelligence, whether we worship it as the scientific spirit, or as scholarship, or as any other reliance upon the mind. We really seek intelligence not for the answers it may suggest to the problems of

TO BE INTELLIGENT

life, but because we believe it is life,—not for aid in making the will of God prevail, but because we believe it is the will of God. We love it, as we love virtue, for its own sake, and we believe it is only virtue's other and more precise name. We believe that the virtues wait upon intelligence—literally wait, in the history of the race. Whatever is elemental in man—love, hunger, fear—has obeyed from the beginning the discipline of intelligence. We are told that to kill one's aging parents was once a demonstration of solicitude; about the same time, men hungered for raw meat and feared the sun's eclipse. Filial love, hunger, and fear are still motives to conduct, but intelligence has directed them to other ends. If we no longer hang the thief or flog the school-boy, it is not that we think less harshly of theft or laziness, but that intelligence has found

THE MORAL OBLIGATION

a better persuasion to honesty and enterprise.

We believe that even in religion, in the most intimate room of the spirit, intelligence long ago proved itself the master-virtue. Its inward office from the beginning was to decrease fear and increase opportunity; its outward effect was to rob the altar of its sacrifice and the priest of his mysteries. Little wonder that from the beginning the disinterestedness of the accredited custodians of all temples has been tested by the kind of welcome they gave to intelligence. How many hecatombs were offered on more shores than that of Aulis, by seamen waiting for a favorable wind, before intelligence found out a boat that could tack! The altar was deserted, the religion revised—fear of the uncontrollable changing into delight in the knowledge that is power. We contemplate with satisfaction the law

TO BE INTELLIGENT

by which in our long history one religion has driven out another, as one hypothesis supplants another in astronomy or mathematics. The faith that needs the fewest altars, the hypothesis that leaves least unexplained, survives; and the intelligence that changes most fears into opportunity is most divine.

We believe this beneficent operation of intelligence was swerving not one degree from its ancient course when under the name of the scientific spirit it once more laid its influence upon religion. If the shock here seemed too violent, if the purpose of intelligence here seemed to be not revision but contradiction, it was only because religion was invited to digest an unusually large amount of intelligence all at once. Moreover, it is not certain that devout people were more shocked by Darwinism than the pious mariners were by the

THE MORAL OBLIGATION

first boat that could tack. Perhaps the sacrifices were not abandoned all at once.

But the lover of intelligence must be patient with those who cannot readily share his passion. Some pangs the mind will inflict upon the heart. It is a mistake to think that men are united by elemental affections. Our affections divide us. We strike roots in immediate time and space, and fall in love with our locality, the customs and the language in which we were brought up. Intelligence unites us with mankind, by leading us in sympathy to other times, other places, other customs; but first the prejudiced roots of affection must be pulled up. These are the old pangs of intelligence, which still comes to set a man at variance against his father, saying, "He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me."

TO BE INTELLIGENT

Yet, if intelligence begins in a pang, it proceeds to a vision. Through measureless time its office has been to make of life an opportunity, to make goodness articulate, to make virtue a fact. In history at least, if not yet in the individual, Plato's faith has come true, that sin is but ignorance, and knowledge and virtue are one. But all that intelligence has accomplished dwindles in comparison with the vision it suggests and warrants. Beholding this long liberation of the human spirit, we foresee, in every new light of the mind, one unifying mind, wherein the human race shall know its destiny and proceed to it with satisfaction, as an idea moves to its proper conclusion; we conceive of intelligence at last as the infinite order, wherein man, when he enters it, shall find himself.

Meanwhile he continues to find his

THE MORAL OBLIGATION

virtues by successive insights into his needs. Let us cultivate insight.

“O Wisdom of the Most High,
That reachest from the beginning to the end,
And dost order all things in strength and grace,
Teach us now the way of understanding.”

BOOK III

THE KINDS OF POETRY

THE KINDS OF POETRY

I

THE many attempts in the last quarter-century to describe or define literary *genres* have assumed in poetry some such evolution as can be demonstrated in geology or anatomy. Literary scholarship has chiefly taught itself to see in the drama a development from the religious rites of Greece or of the Middle Age, to hear in the lyric thin echoes of Lesbos or Provence, and to suspect behind these beginnings, as behind the Homeric epic, lost tracts of primitive poetry

THE KINDS OF POETRY

that reach to the earliest mutterings of the race. To this understanding of poetry and its career the anthropologists, beyond their intention, have been most friendly; their gatherings of folk-song from races or tribes all but incoherent, furnish oblique evidence for the scholar's guess after forgotten poetic origins, much as the surviving monkey witnesses to kindred aspects in our parentage. The study of the beginnings of poetry is now usually supposed to call for the same kind of deduction and induction from fossils and belated survivals as the study of the origin of the horse. Is it too presumptuous to suggest that in this whole drift of literary research there is confusion of ideas?

In the first place, you cannot follow the track of anything that changes until you have some minimum of definition or standard or guide to assure you that from

THE KINDS OF POETRY

change to change you are still following one thing, and not discovering something new. If this generalization is sweeping, at least it can hardly be disputed by the historians of literary *genres*, who have all in some measure assumed and acted upon it. But so far as literature is concerned it does not seem too sweeping. Before you can inquire into the lowliest phases of life you must assume, as a scientist, what every man instinctively feels, that life under all its appearances is one thing. To uncover the history of any kind of poetry, you must carry along with you an image, a definition, of what you would identify. Yet the lyric, the drama, the epic, are still after much discussion undefined, and students of literature are become so reconciled to the unscientific slipperiness of their terminology that they expect no one to mean any specific thing by

THE KINDS OF POETRY

“lyric” or “drama”; they merely try to discover, in each use of each term, the user’s idiosyncrasy, the unconscious mark of himself or his breeding. Or if they feel the need of taming this chaos, they put their hope in those histories of *genres*, already mentioned, which are supposed to describe if not to define. Yet until there is first a definition of what is eternally lyrical, eternally dramatic, how can we know the evolution of lyric or drama?

Such a definition—in the second place—is indispensable not merely to any logical inquiry into evolution, but much more to any fair statement of what men in general think poetry is. In our ordinary thought we conceive of poetry just as we conceive of life itself, as subject to no development whatever. Things either have existed or they have not; the utterances of the race, similarly, have been either poetry or not

THE KINDS OF POETRY

poetry. It is no contradiction of this view that what to one age seems poetic is often unpoetic to the next; for in every such case it is not the poetry but the language, the medium of it, which time has rendered obsolete. Nor does materialistic science present any obstacle to this instinctive selection of the eternal and universal in life and poetry. Indeed, the more materialistic our explanation of life and the more anatomical our account of poetry, the less importance will the evolution of either have in comparison with its permanent aspects. If consciousness is but a fortunate conjunction and behavior of atoms, how wonderful that the myriad different combinations of atoms should have a consciousness in common and should understand each other. If poetry is but an accident of syllables, a fortunate stirring of connotations, emotional and mental,

THE KINDS OF POETRY

how extraordinary that we should agree that some connotations are poetic and others not. To be sure, life and poetry do appear in degree and variations; but to say quantitatively that a man is barely alive or that a piece is almost poetry does not in the least affect the qualitative distinction we all make between living and dead, poetic and unpoetic.

Yet, though the evolutionary historian has not shared this view of poetry as an unchanging function of an unchanging life, it will not do to say, even to imply, that he has contributed nothing to our knowledge. He has only failed to add to our knowledge of poetry. He has made clearer some aspect of the form, the meter, the imagery—what in a large sense we may call the language—of poetry; and in this field his method is practicable, since language does undergo evolution, and its

THE KINDS OF POETRY

relation to poetry is only secondary though indispensable, like the relation of the body to life. To take a ready illustration, the accounts of the development of the drama are for the most part studies of the expression of drama—studies of language, in the large sense—of the number of actors, the shape of the stage, the conditions of presentation; or, more subtly, studies of theme, of reversals of fortune and combat with fate. In every such case the preliminary definition which determined the evolution was based not on the drama, but on the expression of it, or on its subject-matter. Drama is that which can be acted, postulates one historian, and then goes trailing the drama with this lantern, though perhaps he would not agree that everythingactable is dramatic. Tragedy, begins the more subtle scholar, taking his cue from Aristotle, is that kind

THE KINDS OF POETRY

of drama which deals with a tragic incident, a destructive or painful action, such as death or agony or wounds. Yet the Tale of Troy furnishes as apt subject-matter for the lyric or the epic as for the drama, of which the scholar told us tragedy is a kind. And even if he hedges himself round with all these postulates at once, and says that tragedy deals with such and such subject-matter and must be actable, we still can see how the Tale of Troy might be staged and yet turn out to be a lyric after all. The scholar has simply failed to put something in his definition that would make certain the dramatic quality of his tragedy. Illustrations from other kinds of poetry are as easily cited. He who traces a literary *genre* like the elegy, let us say, and determines what is an elegy by some metrical characteristic, is really chronicling the use of that meter

THE KINDS OF POETRY

—just as the scientist who would write the history of man by showing the evolution of his anatomy, really traces only the history of his anatomy. That language, the whole dress of poetry, is as necessary to it as the body is to the phenomenon of life, justifies any amount of study upon it, but it should not be confused with the study of poetry.

Even if poetry were subject to evolution, it would be wise to study it in its latest development. The significance of life is not in the lowest cell, but in the soul of the most spiritual man; and if we are interested in defining the oak, why turn our back upon it, to draw conclusions from an acorn? But it is time to distinguish between language, which has an evolutionary career, and poetry, which has not. The English tongue has evolved since Shakespeare's day, but poetry is just what it

THE KINDS OF POETRY

was. Kill off every horse in the world, and you destroy the species. Kill off every known and suspected poet, and there will be as many as ever after a generation or two. If the language were destroyed, ages would be needed to evolve another; but poetry, being a constant function of life, is rooted as it were perpendicularly in every moment of consciousness, and not horizontally, trailing back long feelers into mist-hidden swamps of primitiveness.

II

It is the aim of this paper to see what progress can be made toward defining poetic *genres* by throwing overboard all idea of evolution and considering poetry as an invariable function of life. In one sense, all poetry is of one kind, and is easily described. Ordinarily the emotions

THE KINDS OF POETRY

aroused by experience are used up in the further process of living. The poet differs from his fellows only in the greater power of his emotions, in the greater imperativeness of his intuitions, whereby it is easier for him to express them in words than to consume them in life. The stimulus that enters the poet's nature and comes out as epical or dramatic or lyrical expression, enters equally the nature of ordinary man and is consumed in lyrical or epic or dramatic living. However theoretical or dogmatic this parallel may seem, in practice it is recognized by all men. A poet's temperament prescribes into which of the three *genres* his work shall fall; and similarly the temperament of average men prescribes whether they shall live in the present, or in the past, or in the future. In these three eternal ways of meeting experience, it is believed, are to be found the

THE KINDS OF POETRY

definitions of the lyric, the drama, and the epic. The qualities to which we give the names "lyrical," "dramatic," "epic," are no less normal and fundamental than these three apprehensions of life—as simply a present moment, or as a present moment in which the past is reaped, or as a present moment in which the future is promised.

We are accustomed to say that the lyric expresses emotion, with or without an admixture of intellectual content; the emotion is the essential. Emotion, however, is the nearest intimation we have of the present moment. A man may act, and not realize that he has done so until afterwards, but he cannot have an emotion until he feels it. Yet vivid as is the response to immediate experience in the lyric, it is also as transitory as time itself—the lyrical is the most evanescent atti-

THE KINDS OF POETRY

tude toward life; and as all feeling tends to subside after the exciting cause is removed, so the lyric is the representation of a changed and dying feeling. Because the emotion is involuntary, its career in the poet's spirit will be to a degree a revelation of his character, and in that revelation some glimpse of his past and future will be involved; but the emphasis will remain upon the sense of the present, and from this flow the lyrical qualities—the immediate emotion and its subsiding.

This transitory nature of feeling has troubled both poets and critics, as the passing of time troubles every meditative spirit, who would make eternal the high moments of life. In the lyric to fix the most fleeting emotion has seemed imperative, but how? Many a poet has been disposed to let the emotion subside into a broad generalized frame of mind—into a

THE KINDS OF POETRY

reflection or a prophecy—and so rescue a permanent lesson from the sinking mood. But whether this disposition tactfully insinuates itself, as in Wordsworth, or bluntly obtrudes, as in Longfellow, the suspicion grows upon the reader that it is a defect of art; the poet's reflection, or whatever else he gets from his emotion, is likely to be personal and peculiar—more and more so as time separates him from his audience, for ages differ in their conventional thoughts more than in their feelings.

Recognizing this difficulty, criticism has never agreed with the poets that the eternity of the lyric should be provided for in the end of it, in the more intellectual part; rather, theorists of literature have formulated a platitude that the lyric is great by virtue of elemental, universal emotion. This would seem to be, however, a reading

THE KINDS OF POETRY

of history into a prudent recipe for fame. Unless it is an affectation, the lyric renders an emotion truly felt, and this sincerity of intuition appears to be all that the poet can be expected to care about. So far as his fame is concerned, the greatness of his poem will depend upon the number of men who share his emotion. That he ought not to take thought overmuch, nor choose between emotions even if he could, seems proved by the very large number of lyrists who have come to their own through the belated sympathy of a new age, to which they would never have appealed had they consulted contemporary preferences in their emotions. And even if the lyric poet has missed fame by the singularity of his reactions to experience, his work is still recognized as lyrical if it have the attitude that responds to life always as a rapturous present moment.

THE KINDS OF POETRY

III

In its unconscious revelation of character, every lyric suggests a momentum of previous conduct, choices made, habits formed; and to the extent of this implication of the past, a lyric is a kind of drama. The difference between them is only a shifting of emphasis. Every drama is in a high sense lyrical, for it must be imagined as happening in the present; and every character in it, supposed to be living in the present, is a lyrical character. But the emphasis of the whole is upon the past. That the drama is the exhibition of human will is true only so far as it exhibits a harvested past, character returning upon itself in the guise of fate; for if a person in a play should will something inconsistent with his known past, or if some trick of fortune should release him

THE KINDS OF POETRY

from his past, the play would not satisfy the dramatic sense. That situation is dramatic which brings men suddenly to account, and he who has the eye for drama sees in life a perpetual judgment day. It is not a matter of analysis, nor of training, but of temperament, and therefore the young Shakspeare, when he writes a sonnet-sequence, manages to write a drama, and later, when the structure of his plays seems premeditated or elaborated, the complexity can be accounted for by the dramatic sense through which he apprehends life. There are two plots in the *Merchant of Venice*; how clever Shakspeare was, say the commentators; to join both in one play. But given the character of Antonio, the merchant, and Shakspeare would have been forced to invent the equivalents of those two plots, if he had not laid hands on them. For An-

THE KINDS OF POETRY

tonio is a moody creature, extravagant in his generosity, careless and reckless in his prejudices. He is a contradiction of himself, and his life, viewed dramatically, must show the simultaneous reaping of his good and bad acts. His insulting bravado with Shylock gets him into danger, but his loan to Bassanio, the generosity bound up with the insult and the bravado, brings Portia to his aid; and when the two streams of fate balance, he becomes again what he was before—moody and contradictory.

To say that Shakspeare constructed this consistency is to forget that without such consistency one cannot conceive of life as the accomplishment of the past. The secret of this harmony of form is not in Shakspeare's craft, but in his intuition. Nor need we attribute to the Greek dramatist any particular theory of hered-

THE KINDS OF POETRY

ity, if in the *Œdipus* story the past that is reaped extends over two generations. His parents grasped at opportunity at all costs, and *Œdipus* inherits their impulsiveness, their inability to consider. To be sure he is indifferent to the identity of the old man he killed on the highway, and he risks his life to share the throne of a queen whom he does not know and has never seen. But only his father would so forget his royalty as to quarrel on the highway with a young vagabond, and only his mother would promise herself indifferently to whoever should answer the Sphinx. It is the same character in all three, and the fault is alike ruinous to all.

The fact that all three characters submit, as it were, to the same judgment day and are punished for the same fault, suggests the observation in passing, that the dramatic point of view tends to unify life

THE KINDS OF POETRY

at any given moment by discovering in it a homogeneous past. Just as the student of anatomy sees the passers-by as skeletons, and as the journalist who investigates graft comes to attribute every defect of government to speculation, so the dramatist, studying the past as reaped by one person in his play, is likely to attribute a similar past to other characters. This duplication of theme is so familiar as hardly to need illustration. *Twelfth Night*, a love story, shows all its characters except the clown to be in some stage of love; *Measure for Measure*, similarly, exhibits the degrees of the fear of death in various natures; and *King Lear* studies life as a problem of filial relations. The significant thing is that this economy of situation and theme is not a matter of choice or craft with the dramatist, any more than the observation of men as skele-

THE KINDS OF POETRY

tons is economy of point of view with the anatomist; it lies rather in the method or means of perception—in the dissective eye, and in the dramatic sense.

The immediate effect, however, of any play read or seen, is less logical, less rigidly consistent, because of the lyrical element—the emphasis of the present moment in all the characters. If the story is to be of value as proving the past, the persons must all speak and act conscious only of the present, without suspicion that they are terms in a demonstration. That is, they must act and speak lyrically. Each present moment, as it passes through the reader's or the spectator's mind, will be interesting in proportion to its emotional intensity, which is furnished partly by the lines, partly by the acting, partly by the situation. These all are lyrical elements. Situation has nothing to do with the dra-

THE KINDS OF POETRY

matic sense, except as it affords character an opportunity to display itself; it looks to the present, and sometimes to the future, but never to the past. How unconscious of the past the acting must be, has just been suggested. The lines may be very lyrical, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, without much glancing at the dramatic drift, or they may be capable of a double meaning, lyrical to the speaker and dramatic to his hearers, as in *Macbeth*.

The kind of character or emotion revealed in the lyric, we saw, has been thought to have a bearing upon its probable fame. It is obvious, however, that drama may be judged either by the kind of emotion, the kind of character exhibited—from the standpoint of the actor—or by the extent to which the reaping of the past is felt. It is a common enough phenomenon of stage history that the popular

THE KINDS OF POETRY

favor often leaps to the lyrical side, and many a play dramatically bad succeeds because it contains some character lyrically good. But if the play gives a strong enough sense of the past, that is, if the characters are consistent with their own history, they may be lyrically what they please; they must in that case appeal less upon the virtue of their emotions than upon the justice of their fate. An audience will permit the lyric to express only such emotions as they at the moment understand, but in the drama they will accept the emotion tentatively until they see what is to become of it. Satan cursing God in a lyric will not please the pious, who yet would be delighted to see him in a drama cursing God and getting punished for it.

The drama has one other lyrical effect, in the general emotional tone it conveys.

THE KINDS OF POETRY

This tone is serious in proportion as the work is felt to be a reaping of the past; every judgment day is serious, even if we are acquitted. Therefore there is no clear line to be drawn between tragedy and comedy, for different men and different ages will disagree as to what is serious; nor is there any essential difference between tragedy and comedy, since a mere change of opinion as to what is serious so easily converts one into the other. The occasion of laughter or merriment in the play is from the lyrical part—from the speech or the situation or the acting—and we enjoy it for the passing moment; but every comedy which is really dramatic becomes serious with time, as men more highly value the sacredness of human nature. Beatrice and Benedick amuse us while they are joking or while others trick them, and Petruchio's behavior at his wed-

THE KINDS OF POETRY

ding is funny while we hear of it, but in so far as we care about those characters, such episodes grieve our sense of the dignity of life. The difference, then, that at first sight appears between comedy and tragedy depends upon nothing but whether we care so little for the characters that laughter is adequate armor against the judgments they unconsciously pronounce upon themselves, or whether we require a nobler kind of fortitude.

IV

The lyric is closer to the drama than to the epic, and there are fewer epics than either lyrics or dramas. The reason is probably that a sense of the future—the ability to see life as a prospect of destiny—is far rarer than a sense of the past, to say nothing of the immediate sense of the

THE KINDS OF POETRY

present, and it seems to have always something of the miraculous in it. If each moment can be seen as a harvest of previous moments, there is every logical reason why the interest of the present should be the future it promises; but only men of unusual faith have risen to this logic, and even they felt the promise of destiny more as a gift from a superior being than as a consequence of the present. Indeed, where the promise reveals itself to a nature of great optimism, it often takes the form of strong contrast with things as they are, and the lyrical and the epical moods in the poem are almost miraculously contradictory. Æneas is humanly weak, his expedition but a frail band to make certain the destiny of Rome; the poet intends us to set the lyrical mood of the hero—regret, reluctance, even terror—over against the majesty of the imperial doom he served.

THE KINDS OF POETRY

It is a contrast, not a consequence; or if a consequence, then too much a thing of wonder for the logic of normal man.

A more superficial reason has usually been given for the small number of epics in literature, especially for the total disappearance of the *genre* in modern times. It is said that every epic must have a plot in heaven, working itself out in human fortunes on earth, because the epic exhibits divine will, as the drama exhibits the will of man; and since we no longer have a well-peopled anthropomorphic heaven, we can no longer show the gods plotting there. But to say that the epic exhibits divine will is only to say that it gives the sense of destiny, the feeling of guidance to an end. Why cannot men express such a feeling without a scene on Olympus? The gods and goddesses of the old epics were but part of the language with which the epic

THE KINDS OF POETRY

feeling was expressed; they are no more essential to the rendering of that sense than the kings and queens of the old plays are essential to the drama. If only we had an epic to express, we could make the language for it. But, say the historians, the epic has always dealt with a world crisis, involving a higher and a lower civilization; how can we have this large kind of poetry again until we have another great crisis? If the historian be American, he often concludes by wondering why the Civil War, so easily comparable to that of Troy, never found its Homer. Yet these explanations, and the description of the epic implied in them, are not sufficiently searching. The world crisis which is clear enough now in the *Æneid* was probably not clear until Virgil made it so, and whether he believed in the mythology and the heaven he wrote of, made no difference

THE KINDS OF POETRY

poetically to him, and makes none to us. The essence of the epic is that attitude toward life which sees in the moment a destined future. This attitude in no sense is conditioned by acquaintance with Greek theology, nor by use of classical hexameters, nor by division into a certain number of books, nor by any other accident of form. It may invest itself with each or all of these circumstances, but they are not essential to it. The epic attitude in *Don Quixote*, without aid of gods in a heavenly plot, exhibits itself in that pathetic brooding upon the destiny of Spain of which the great novel is eloquent. The epic attitude in the *Song of Roland* is likewise not a matter of celestial furniture, nor of Greek or Roman verse, but a matter, as Gaston Paris said, of love for an idealized France, for the country which seemed the appointed champion-in-arms of Christen-

THE KINDS OF POETRY

dom. The epic attitude in the work of Victor Hugo, another but a similar idealization of France, is not completely expressed in one of his writings, but diffused through all of them. That the Don should be shipwrecked by the actual facts of life, or that Roland should be slain by the Saracens, diminishes as little from the sense of destiny as that Aeneas should sometimes be frightened. The *Aeneid* and the *Song of Roland* and *Don Quixote* are the work of men who conceived of their race as serving a prospect of fate. Without this attitude no epic is possible.

If literature is now comparatively barren of this kind of poetry, may it not be because this age, in spite of much theorizing, has no confidence as to what its destiny may be? It is not that we have lost the gods. If we no longer have Milton's celestial personages and geography, we

THE KINDS OF POETRY

have the idea of evolution, which ought to give the strongest possible conviction of our future. But evolution, whether in the hands of the literary historian or in those of the scientist, has been exclusively occupied in clarifying and reinforcing our sense of the past; it has not even suggested whither we are bound. No wonder that its chief service has been to the drama, which with a new, scientific confidence now shows us the inevitability of one moment upon the next, the sins of the fathers visited mathematically upon the children; no wonder that with this rejuvenated day of judgment perpetually before us, our drama is dark and tragic, and deals, however wholesomely, with our worse selves. The beast we were, constantly returns to bear witness against the man we think we are.

Exactly what sort of epic we shall have

THE KINDS OF POETRY

when science becomes once more prospective and hopeful it is hardly worth while to guess, but the permanent traits of the *genre* are fairly clear. Just as the lyric enters into the drama, so the drama enters into epic; for a sense of destiny involves some guidance out of the past and the present, the direction of to-morrow being found as it were by the two points of to-day and yesterday. To the ancient mind all this meant simply the will of the gods, within such limits as the gods were free; therefore a drama was enacted in heaven reaping the past of the divinities, and that harvest became on earth man's fate. To state it another way, man would be most devout, most ready to attribute his future to the past of the gods, at those moments of history when he felt himself in a world-current of destiny. Tasso and Milton felt such prophetic influences, though they sub-

THE KINDS OF POETRY

stituted the Christian heaven and divinities for the pagan. And however the future poet creates new imagery or modifies the old, he will keep unchanged the soul of the epic—the prospect of the race; and in this prospect will remain, if only in a diffused state, a dramatic consciousness of the past from which it grew.

The lyric also enters into the epic, not only as it is included in the heavenly drama, but throughout the poem—most obviously in the character of the hero, upon whom the will of the gods falls. Here again the poem may be judged by the lyric impression—by the behavior of the hero. Such a standard, however, leaves us disappointed with most epics. For it is to the poet's advantage to minimize the strength of the hero and magnify his obedience, in order that the power of destiny on him may seem irresistible;

THE KINDS OF POETRY

otherwise the poet may find he has written not epic but drama. It is best rather to judge a poem by the quality that distinguishes its *genre*. The test of the epic attitude is in the consistency of its sense of an inexorable future—which is quite apart from its lyrical excellences.

Finally, the epic, like the drama, has a total lyric aspect, as naturally hopeful as the sense of the past is naturally serious. No matter how somber the incidents or the situation, they are in the epic but opportunities for the display of destiny; every moment promises a new beginning. For an epic to be pessimistic is a paradox, and indicates a confusion in the poet's view of life.

V

If these definitions of the kinds of poetry

THE KINDS OF POETRY

are just, they would seem to open for the student of literature, if he so desires, a new field besides that of language in which to apply the principle of evolution. The changes that can be traced in literary history are changes not of poetry nor of its kinds, but of the spiritual ideals, the social conventions and proprieties, the political conditions, which at any given time are as it were the raw material of literature; and in this material some principle of evolution may perhaps be found. For example, the history of English drama, if drama is the sense of the past called to judgment, should study the changes in the English conception of what is a test of character. The Elizabethan stage dealt with situations of great adventure—with murders, shipwrecks, plots, and surprises; whereas the modern play usually prefers a test of character taken from an ordered,

THE KINDS OF POETRY

quiet life. Evidently there has been a change in the English ideal of success and failure. It will not do to assume that the nature of drama has changed, nor even that the process of time has made the modern play more dramatic; *Lear* and *Macbeth* and *Othello* hold their own by any definitions. But it is illuminating to remember that the successful man, in the Renaissance ideal, was one who could cope with every public or private emergency. It was not enough that he should be morally good—a beggar might be that; but he—and the women as well—must have the varied efficiency of gentlefolk born to a career. Viola, Portia, Orlando meet emergencies with success; Hamlet and Othello do not. The modern playwright, however, would be most unlikely to represent any of these excellent persons as tragic victims, because the modern ideal

THE KINDS OF POETRY

of success is a matter of living, as it were, on the defensive, not by rising to extraordinary accomplishment, but by avoiding such errors as later may embarrass us; our typical tragedy shows some weakness overtaking us in the very routine of our existence. Between this idea of failure and the Elizabethan, there is a change that cannot be understood without the historian's help; and there are similar changes, calling for similar help, in the crude material that has gone into lyrics and epics. If the study of these changes is not specifically the study of poetry, at least it is the study of man's way of accounting for himself to himself—not an ignoble study; and its effect would be to show the roots of poetry in life, by illuminating man's eternal effort to restate life so that it will satisfy him, and the eternal moods through which the eternal effort is made.

**THE TEACHING OF
POETRY**

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

I

IF we are teachers of poetry, it is the love of poetry, one may suppose, that made us so. At some critical moment of childhood or youth we may have taken down from the shelves of the library at home what seemed a chance volume—but it was our fate in our hands. We opened at random at that sparse distribution of type down the center of the page which we knew signified verse. What good angel bade us read? A cadence, an image, a line—and poetry was born in us, the singing heart, the divine homesickness and

THE KINDS OF POETRY

the growing wings, the enchanted madness, sudden and beautiful and incurable beyond other kinds of falling in love.

For me poetry began with three and a half lines from the *Idyls of the King*. So vivid was the experience that I still see just where the words stood on the page, and just how the afternoon sun streamed through the window, and how the old green-bound copy of Tennyson was transfigured as I read—

“Long stood Sir Bedivere
Revolving many memories, till the hull
Looked one black dot against the verge of dawn,
And on the mere the wailing died away.”

My father came into the room, I remember, and I read out the lines to him. He agreed that they were admirable, but to my surprise he did not find them momentous.

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

Or if no verses awakened us, perhaps some heaven-sent teacher brought to mind our heritage in Tennyson or Shelley, in Wordsworth or Milton, in Keats or Spenser; heaven-sent he seems to us now, though his pedagogy was nothing more than drawing aside the forgetfulness that veiled our better selves from us, and his "insights," as we called them, into the masters were but naming over the things we too in a groping way liked best. He did not introduce, he restored us, to poetry. And other beginnings in poetry—secondary beginnings, they might be called—we owe to teachers of literature in school and college, whose chance or intended allusions to vital things in books and to ideal things in life lighted up beauty by the way. To give a list of such allusions would furnish no clue to their importance, for even at the time they seemed casual, and memory

THE KINDS OF POETRY

holds them without much contact or relation to each other; but they made poetry more intelligible and more lovable. I think, for example, of a lecture in my freshman year in which a comparison was made between Lowell and Matthew Arnold. One poet-critic, I forget which, was the subject of the lecture, and the other was brought in, perhaps on the moment's inspiration, for a natural contrast between English and American contemporaries; but it was the contrast, however incidental, that won my affection for both writers. I think also of a lecture on Shelley and one on Milton, in which the splendid reading of well-chosen passages made the poets live. Such moments of dawn or starlight never cease altogether for the poetry lover, though the glamour is on the earliest. Gratitude prefers not to discriminate among them. Should I be more

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

grateful to that Lowell-Arnold talk, which came first, or to some wonderful lectures on Virgil, which I can hardly expect to hear bettered? Did I gain more from reading those lines in the *Passing of Arthur*, which were for me the doorway to poetry, or from reading Plato's *Symposium*, which was the house itself?

The desire to teach poetry then, as I understand it, is the desire to provide others with just such new-births into the world of imagination as we have received from books and from instructors. Teaching poetry, in this sense, is not teaching meter or verse forms, nor even teaching the subject-matter of poems; it is the multiplying of those fortunate moments when the soul is dilated and the universe enlarged. We may conclude that graduate students have in mind a failure to provide such moments for them when they com-

THE KINDS OF POETRY

plain, as they sometimes do, that the course leading to the doctorate does not lead them to poetry.

But when we start out to teach poetry in our own enlightened way, we soon fall into a suspicion that it cannot be taught at all. We begin with an exuberant purpose to reproduce our good fortune in the lives of others, to give them the books that helped us, and to imitate for their benefit the inspiring insights of our masters; but somehow the magic illusion does not get created. We call the attention of our students to the passage from Tennyson which first was poetry to us, but our students see nothing in it but Tennyson; and as for imitating our former teachers, even our colleagues look at us with pity when we try to explain the secrets of the priceless instruction we once sat under. In a dark moment we recall that many of our class-

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

mates came away from that lecture on Lowell-Arnold, or from that on Virgil, untouched by any gleam. These ministrations, we come to fear, are like other service of the spirit, too personal, too much indebted to the place and the hour, for any one to make them his profession. We may in a sense teach literature, but not poetry, we fear. We may lecture on the contributing circumstances of literary production, on the language, on the lives of the authors; but for poetry, we fear, for the spark from heaven, the student like the scholar gypsy must wait, and we half believe with the scholar gypsy that he had better wait outside our class.

We are not likely to agree on any advice for teaching poetry until we have disposed of this primary discouragement. Yet though the discouragement is so general, we ought to dispose of it easily. For

THE KINDS OF POETRY

we know there are many successful teachers of poetry; almost every college has one at some time or other—usually all the time. Though most of us found our first love of poetry in a book, it was probably an inspiring teacher who gave us our second love of it, and sent us to the university. If only a rare man could be found whose pupils became poetry lovers, we might well call him a genius, and give up hope; but since there are a number of such teachers, why should we think their equipment or their success beyond our imitation? The cause of our discouragement is that we try to reproduce for our students the exact conditions of our own initiation; we would have them admire the same passages in the same poems, and we even attempt to repeat the mannerisms and the very words of our teachers. But allowing for every variation of temperament in

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

teachers and students, and for the accidents of time and of locality, we may yet hope to teach poetry without a too terrifying dependence on the spark from heaven. To a certain extent we may even cultivate those apparently magical insights into literature. Very simply, we may observe and imitate what the successful teachers of poetry have in common. What is their purpose in teaching poetry? What peculiarities are discoverable in their equipment?

II

The office of the teacher of poetry is easily defined; it is to afford a mediation between great poets and their audience. For the most part the poets addressed themselves to their contemporaries without suspecting they would ever need in-

THE KINDS OF POETRY

terpretation. Certain youthful ones, like the Spenser of the *Shepherd's Calendar*, may have annotated their works in advance, but there is no evidence that even they looked forward with pleasure to being lectured on by college professors. Yet even for the most direct poets time has gradually obscured the meaning, by changing the language or by dropping out some of the environment which made the book pertinent. With every year a gulf widens between the book and its reader. The office of the teacher of literature, then, is to supply the information, the background, whatever is lacking to make the reader at home with the book.

But if we are to explain any of the past, we shall need to know all of it, at least as much as possible; we must draw on more than one kind of record, on history and philosophy as well as on fiction and

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

imaginative writing. Perhaps even so we shall not be able to recover the past; but if the whole record is not sufficient, a part of it certainly will not be. It is no accident that the successful teachers of literature have usually been students of philosophy or of history or of both, and if we wish to imitate them, our first step must be to broaden our definition of literature until it includes not only poetry and the novel, essays and drama, but also the masterpieces of biography and other forms of history, of philosophy, and of science. If such a counsel of indiscrimination is surprising, we should observe that here is no advice to teach history or to teach philosophy; it may be plain in a moment that such services are quite distinct from teaching poetry. The advice is rather to consider all masterpieces of expression as literature, as poetry if you wish—capable

THE KINDS OF POETRY

of giving us that new birth of the imagination which we defined as the experience of poetry—whether they happen to deal with an emotional dream, or with the annals of a nation, or with abstract enquiry. If even in this form the advice is puzzling, it is so only because we are students of English literature. We inherit the unenviable distinction of having put poetry off into a corner, and of treating with contempt those other and inseparable records on which poetry often depends. No such advice would surprise us were we students of Greek letters, nor would the advice be needed; for the classical scholar, so far as I know, has never omitted Aristotle or Plato or Thucydides or Herodotus from his canon of literature, any more than the French student has omitted Descartes or Rousseau or Voltaire. Both the classical and the French students, therefore, have

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

the advantage of studying, along with poetry, a body of facts and a body of ideas which often determine the inspiration of poems. In teaching English we do sometimes talk of the ideas of evolution in *In Memoriam*, but we ignore those predecessors of Darwin whom Tennyson studied, and Darwin himself, of course, we do not read. If it be urged that he did not write with felicity, and therefore deserves to be counted out of literature, what shall be said of Hobbes and Locke, of Berkeley and Hume, or how shall we dispose of such an historian as Gibbon? The offerings in college courses would indicate that these writers are none of them considered germane to the study of literature, not to say the study of poetry.

The narrow definition of poetry which excludes prose, and the narrow definition of literature which excludes history and

THE KINDS OF POETRY

philosophy, are in a sense novelties with us. When Sidney defended poetry, he understood within the term the parables of Christ and the dialogues of Plato; of verse writing by itself he said little. When Milton wrote of his ambition to be a poet, it was metrical composition that he had in mind, but his definition did not preclude the most austere of philosophic subjects. Shelley in his beautiful essay, itself a poem, resumed Sidney's large outlook, and wrote of poetry as of a way of apprehending all phases of life, even in prose. We may say broadly that the sixteenth, the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries in England defined poetry as the French or the classical reader would define it, and that even in the nineteenth century large-natured critics who had the best of their training from the century before, took this just view of literature. But with

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

the romantic movement came an emphasis upon feeling as opposed to thought, and therefore on the literature of the emotions as opposed to the literature of reason. To the exponents of this school it does not seem to have occurred that reason can itself be the object of passion, or the cause of it; on the contrary, the mathematical conceptions of a Newton were relegated by the new literary taste to the limbo of "cold thought," whereas a primrose by a river's brim became the occasion for poetic temperature and the summons to poetic meditation.

The formal doctrine that only those books are literature which have to do somewhat exclusively with the emotions, was set forth in De Quincey's half forgotten yet too typical letter on the literature of knowledge and the literature of power. Knowledge was once thought to be power,

THE KINDS OF POETRY

but De Quincey did not think so. "The antithesis of literature," he says, "is books of knowledge. . . . All that is literature seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature, to communicate knowledge." What does he mean by power? Power is the awakening in us of emotional aptitudes or forces which we were not previously aware of—a definition wide enough to be harmless, except that the romanticist could not imagine his heart so fluttered by an accession of knowledge. "If it be asked," he says, "what is meant by communicating power, I in my turn would ask by what name a man would designate the case in which I should be made to feel vividly, and with a vital consciousness, emotions which ordinary life rarely or never supplies occasion for exciting, and which had previously lain unawakened and hardly within the dawn of

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

consciousness.” Those books, then, which stir the emotion and dilate the imagination—books like *The English Mail Coach*—belong to literature; whereas books like Gibbon’s history, since they supply us with knowledge rather than with emotion, are not literature, but the antithesis of it.

It is hardly worth the time to argue with De Quincey, who nowadays has become the mere shell of an author, a stylistic ghost. His theory in itself might even be considered unobjectionable, so long as it is not applied to any particular book. But unfortunately his point of view has prevailed, to the harm of our teaching of literature. In many colleges to this day the formula survives that the nineteenth century was a well of true poetry, whereas the eighteenth century was an arid discipline of rhetoric—that the English imagination slept fitfully through a nightmare

THE KINDS OF POETRY

of suffocation in Dryden, Pope and Gray, and awoke with deep breaths of gratitude for being alive in Wordsworth and Coleridge, even in Leigh Hunt. The eighteenth century has become a mystic term of reproach, which like some other mystic things, will not bear looking into. If we are thoroughgoing romanticists we remove from the century any writers who do not illustrate our conception of it. "The eighteenth century," we say "was a period of rhetoric and cold facts, wherein poetry and imagination were dead. William Collins, however, Chatterton, Blake, Burns, Thomson, and Cowper, really belong to the nineteenth century; it is only by an accident that they lived in the eighteenth. It is only by an accident also that Addison's discussion of *Paradise Lost* and Warton's *Observations on the Faerie Queene* appeared when they did. We

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

know this is so, because the eighteenth century did not care for imaginative poetry." If we are fond of Wordsworth, it is with reluctance that we admit he owed something to Pope. If we admit any merit in Pope, we probably concede it to *The Rape of the Lock*, a poem which could have taught Wordsworth little; but we balk at the *Essay on Man*, though it is not more didactic than *The Excursion*, and certainly is clearer and shorter. We may be persuaded to approve even the *Essay on Man*, but beyond this we absolutely will not go; here we take our stand on the last perilous edge of literature; we will not drop into the chasm of knowledge. The invitation comes to us in the suggestion that for the ideas of his essay Pope drew on Shaftesbury and Bolingbroke, and indirectly on Liebnitz; and to read those gentlemen might help us to understand

THE KINDS OF POETRY

the essay. But why understand it any better? We reflect that we are far enough away from poetry as it is.

Perhaps it is time for me to say that I hold no special brief for Pope nor for the eighteenth century, nor do I fail to admire the greatness of the romantic poets. What the lover of poetry must hold a brief for is the truth that each generation gets its poetic thrill out of slightly different images and suggestions, and it is impertinent for any age to conclude that its particular way of enjoying poetry is the only right one. If I found poetry first in a bit of romantic suggestion in Tennyson, naturally I am not the less grateful to the romantic method. But other people have made their discovery of poetry in such lines of Pope's as,

“Act well your part; there all the honor lies,”

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

or even in passages still more practical and informing. If we are to teach all of poetry rather than some particular school, we must recognize that those insights, those enlarged moments of the soul, which we agreed it is the object of poetry to impart, can be found by different readers in different authors. With that variety of taste it would be useless as well as impertinent to interfere. Falling in love, in poetry as elsewhere, is an invariable experience, universally understood; but as to the object which caused the excitement, there is no need to agree.

On this general ground we might well plead that the more intellectual kinds of writing should be restored to our definition of poetry. But there is also a special reason, which even the most romantic teachers of poetry now admit. The tendency to neglect as unpoetic all writers

THE KINDS OF POETRY

who are given to vigorous intellectual processes, who really think, and to praise exclusively those who appeal to our emotions, has largely destroyed the ability to read. A serious poet to-day, with an idea as well as an emotion, faces a hospitable but an incapacitated audience. It has become almost an unfair question to ask poetry lovers just what their favorite poems mean, for poetry, by romantic definition and by assiduous practice, has become an emotional experience without coherent meaning. The ill effects of such a definition have been progressive. Those who refused to grapple with the not very profound argument of Pope soon found it inconvenient to follow the argument in Wordsworth or in Tennyson or in Browning. A few years ago a stand was made against this increasing reluctance to know what poetry specifically means, and now

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

a wholesome reaction is well started, but for the moment there was much bandying about of the phrase "teaching ideas in literature," as though to stress ideas were to inject into literature a foreign or novel element. All that the phrase actually stood for was a return of the sane conviction that, provided one cares deeply for the things of the intellect, ideas are proper subjects for emotion and therefore for poetry, and that those writers who express intelligible ideas should be intelligently appreciated, over and above whatever emotional power their art may afford. The reaction is now so far advanced that we need not forfeit our reputation as lovers of poetry if we insist on knowing just what Shelley means in certain portions, let us say, of the *Prometheus Unbound*, or of the *Epipsychidion*; nor are we lost if we conclude that Shelley did not always

THE KINDS OF POETRY

know what he meant. We need not be deaf to his superb music; we need not deny that for those moods which are satisfied by pure music he is always adequate; nor need we be blind to the noble intellectual designs that usually do clarify his profuse emotion. We need but discriminate honestly between his merits and his shortcomings, between his moments of thought and his moments of uncontrolled feeling; so shall we deserve the confidence of those willing students who try to like him, since he is a famous poet, but who cannot see at all times what his poetry is about.

III

As soon as we have convinced ourselves that our definition of literature should include history and philosophy, there is dan-

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

ger that we may become teachers of history or teachers of philosophy, rather than teachers of literature. We are most likely to become historians. There is of course no objection to teaching history; the only question is whether by so doing we are not departing from our first ambition to confer on others our love of poetry. We should observe that the teaching of literature as history differs radically from the use of history to understand literature. It is true, of course, that poetry is a record of thoughts and feelings, and that we may try, if we wish, to trace the development of culture in English poetry from Beowulf to Blake. But there are grave difficulties in the way, and even if the performance were easy, there would be nothing in it to make one necessarily a lover of poetry, any more than Gibbon's masterly summarizing of theological creeds

THE KINDS OF POETRY

would make converts to them. And even from the historical point of view, poetry is dangerous material from which to recover the visage of the past. In proportion to the completeness with which it reflects life, it is a mirror for every age to see itself in, but we do not look into mirrors to see the person who was there before us. The great poets capture a whole field of vision, though focusing on only a part of it; we can find in the picture, as we can find in life, many details that never interested them. In this inclusiveness the poet, unlike the philosopher or the historian, is often more profound than he intended to be. Reflecting on this fact, we may be chary of ascribing to any poet, or to his age, the things in his works that are precious to us. Nothing in recent years, for example, has probably been more satisfying to lovers of poetry than

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

the revival of interest in Euripides among English readers—a revival brought about largely by the genius and the enthusiasm of Professor Gilbert Murray. But along with this appreciation of the noble poetry, perhaps finally to undermine that appreciation, if we only knew, has gone much emphasis upon the modern note in Euripides—upon his foreknowledge, as it were, of the problems that distress our age. Beyond question it is possible to quote from him passages strangely apposite to contemporary themes, yet it does not follow that he had any more understanding of our times than other poets equally great, or that his message is more intimate for us than it was for men a hundred years ago. It is Professor Murray who belongs to our age; to say that Euripides is modern may well be only an awkward and misleading way of registering his immortality,

THE KINDS OF POETRY

his capacity for being interpreted to any age. Though we can find our thoughts expressed in him, we hardly need to revise our notion of the Greeks, so as to attribute our thoughts to them. In some cases the contemporary note is palpable luck. When the old nurse, trying to persuade Hippolytus to love Phaedra, remarks that Aphrodite is a beautiful goddess, universally worshipped among men, the youth, who is devoted to Artemis, answers that what god one worships is a matter of taste. Does the reply sound sophisticated, disillusioned? Perhaps it is so to readers at least tentatively monotheistic, but nothing could be more sensibly pious on the lips of a youth like Hippolytus, who had a number of gods to choose from.

If poetry has the faculty of reflecting various meanings, of expressing the reader quite as much as it expresses the writer,

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

I

and if for that reason it is dangerous material with which to teach history, for the same reason it is an unsafe vehicle for the teaching of philosophy. Here also we should observe that the teaching of literature as philosophy differs radically from the use of philosophy to understand literature. When we would appreciate the *Essay on Man*, there is an advantage in knowing Shaftesbury and Bolingbroke, just as there is an advantage in knowing the early theories of evolution when we would read *In Memoriam*; if it was an idea that stirred the poet's emotion, perhaps we must understand the idea before the same emotion will be stirred in us. But there is a world of difference between emotional contact with an idea and philosophic control of it. Certain ideas, the denial of the old-fashioned kind of immortality, for example, produced a mo-

THE KINDS OF POETRY

mentous effect on Tennyson, leaving him perplexed and wrought; in time he got used to his perplexities, without solving any of them, and he had the genius to give us a faithful record of his doubts, just as they beset him, and a faithful record of his getting used to them. There may be a philosophy in the writers he had been reading, who produced this effect upon him, but there is no philosophy in *In Memoriam*, no system of thought, only a series of emotional reactions to ideas. Those indefatigable commentators who still approach the poem in the faith that Tennyson, being a good poet, ought to have a sound theology, are sore put to it to furnish him out of their own philosophies with even a patched-up and dubitable system. Desiring to get a precise translation of what the poet by his own account only vaguely felt, they must wrangle for-

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

ever as to just what was intended by "Strong son of God, immortal love," at one end of the poem, or by "One far off divine event," at the other. The question would be a fair one to ask of a philosopher, but it is an unfair one to ask of a poet who for the moment records not ideas but the distress produced by them. Even when the poet is intentionally philosophical, as Pope is in his *Essay*, or—to take a great example at once—as Lucretius is in his epic of nature, there is something more permanent in him than the philosophy; there is what we call poetry, that kindling of the heart and the imagination which philosophy may be the cause of, but which is not philosophy. It is to this that we first gave our devotion, and it is this we desire to teach.

We cannot make the distinction too clear. Instead of teaching poetry as

THE KINDS OF POETRY

though it were history or as though it were philosophy, we need to draw on history and philosophy in order to understand poetry. History is a large word. It means all that is necessary for us to know before we can be contemporary with a poem. To read Chaucer with every advantage, we must recover as far as possible the frame of mind which the men of his time brought to their acquaintance with his work. We must know their language, their political, social and other opinions, their attitude toward life and toward poetry in general, and their prejudice for or against the poet. All the scholarship needed for this recovery of Chaucer's time may be conceived of as history, whether it involves learning biographical facts or learning a language. Study of this kind is the only magic to change us into a contemporary of any remote writer, if that be

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

at all possible. We often think the change costs more than it is worth; we are especially rebellious when a language has to be mastered, merely to read a poet whom we may not care for, after all. So unpopular has language study become, that the entire moral responsibility for it will shortly rest on heartless graduate faculties. But this ought not to surprise us in an era when it has been considered no handicap to a reader not to know just what his favorite poet means. For many of us, of course, philology in the narrow sense may never prove alluring; at most it may be for us only a limited approach to poetry. But some knowledge of language is obligatory if we are to make any comparative study of literature, whether we compare the poets of our own race in different centuries, or the poets of different races in our own time; and we would prob-

THE KINDS OF POETRY

ably admit that without some comparison of poetry the teaching of it can hardly get far. The summons to be contemporary, to study the poetry of our own time and our own country, is a gallant encouragement to be self-reliant, to stand on our feet, as Emerson and Whitman invited us to do. Besides, the invitation excuses us from learning Anglo-Saxon, or German, or French, or Latin or Greek. Yet what an unimaginative love of poetry that would be, which could be satisfied to rest on one time or in one place! Whoever got his first love of poetry from a strictly contemporary poem? It was the quickening of imagination in us that made the experience poetic, and imagination rarely gets its first quickening from what is close at hand. Whether we read back into time, or crosswise into foreign literature of our own day, some arduous study of language,

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

of all that we have called history, and some effort of imagination, must be undertaken before we are neighbor to the poet whose works we hope to understand.

If the historical approach to literature is unpopular, perhaps the teachers of literature are themselves to blame. It is so easy to teach history instead of poetry; it is so natural to assume that these historical matters on which we spend so much study have to do, not only with the approach to poetry, but also with poetry itself. The whole service of history, however, is but to make us contemporary with the author. Once become contemporary, we are in no better position than any other readers who are about to make the acquaintance of a new poem. When we are finally at home in Chaucer's age, we face there the same problems of appreciation and criticism as we face when we read

THE KINDS OF POETRY

verse in the morning paper. Does the poem thrill us? Why? Is it a good poem? Why? The study of history merely postpones these elementary questions; it never can answer them. The fact that Chaucer derived his plots from Boccaccio or from some one else, and the fact that his language evolved largely from the Anglo-Saxon or is recruited from the French, can have no bearing on the value of his work as poetry. No matter how far scholarship retreats into history, it is still backing away from those simple questions that baffled the critics of *Fannie's First Play*.

The young lover of poetry, recalling that he found his most beautiful experience in some lines the author and date of which he perhaps did not know, is naturally wary of the unconscious tendency to substitute historical information for liter-

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

ary insight. He observes that the purely historical approach is helpless in dealing with a poem just written—worse than helpless, for it often tries to operate blithely where there is no history. I once heard a great philologist tell a young poet that his lyric just published in a magazine was one of the most admirable poems in American literature. The happy author asked wherein this excellence had been noticed, and the scholar replied with enthusiasm that every word in the lyric was of Anglo-Saxon origin. I still see the look on the poet's face. Only a few months ago we were reading a description of a well known school of English teaching. The description was seriously intended and entirely laudatory; it set forth an ideal. "In its literary studies," we read, this school "aims to get at the bottom of things, to explain relations, to trace an author in

THE KINDS OF POETRY

his borrowings, to lay bare the influence under which he wrote. To mere esthetic evaluation it turns a deaf ear." In other words, the merit of this way of teaching literature is that it attends exclusively to the historical approach, and resolutely declines to consider what the poet and his readers are primarily interested in—the effect produced by the poem itself. It is a natural and fortunate instinct of the student, who still remembers his genuine contacts with poetry, to protect himself against this theory of teaching. Unhappily the student often protects himself too much, failing to see the immense importance of historical investigation properly employed, as a means of becoming contemporary with old poets.

When the historian stands helpless at last before the poem itself, the philosopher comes to his rescue. To criticize a poem

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

written yesterday or this morning, one needs not a record but a theory of life.

✓ We pass judgment immediately on our neighbor's actions, on his thoughts and emotions, without going into his biography. An account of his life might indeed affect our opinion of his morals or his motives, but his acts themselves we judge by our own scale of values. Poetry, a reflection of action or thought or feeling, is judged in no other way. The equipment of the best teachers of literature is principally this, that by experience or study they have arrived at a coherent philosophy of life, and have therefore an instrument with which to take hold of new emotions and new thoughts. It makes little difference what our philosophy is, so long as it is sincere and thorough; of course, the more it explains of life and letters, the better it is, but the desirable thing

THE KINDS OF POETRY

is to have some philosophy. If we can organize our teaching of literature so that our students will come in contact with historical and philosophical masterpieces, we may hope that they will feel not too far estranged from the atmosphere that surrounds the older poets, and that, once become contemporary with those poets, they will formulate a consistent chart of life by which to orient themselves in all poetry, even in that written to-day.

IV

The service that philosophy renders in giving insights into poetry is so simple that it needs no elaborate illustration. Yet I should like to suggest one or two examples, if for no other reason than because I have come to believe that the magical "insights" we admired in our former teachers can be acquired by anyone

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

who will first get, what they had, a sound philosophy. We shall probably derive little help from the usual books on esthetics, though it is to them that the literary man would naturally turn; rather we may expect to find inspiration in those discussions which are not of art but of life. For myself, I have usually owed most to those simple observations on books which call attention to the behavior of our emotions in ordinary living. To make these observations is perhaps the achievement of only the ripest philosophy. I recall a class-hour twenty years ago, when George Edward Woodberry was initiating us into the genius of Keats. What was said at the beginning or in the middle of the period I do not remember, but just before the bell rang to dismiss the class Mr. Woodberry spoke of that wonderful last sonnet, "Bright star, would I were sted-

THE KINDS OF POETRY

fast as thou art." He called our attention to the fact that what Keats had to say was all in the final six lines, but that the first eight were more essential than perhaps they seemed, since without them we might not be in the mood to understand the poet's desire. Keats was leaving England, as he knew, to die, and his mind was on his betrothed, whom he was not to see again; in his sickness and despair he wished he might lay his head on her breast, and die in that comfort. "But," said Mr. Woodberry, "you cannot approach a stranger, who may be thinking of other things, and greet him with the news that you wish to lay your head on a certain woman's bosom; he may misinterpret you. Knowing the need, therefore, of preparing the reader for what he wishes to say, Keats makes us think first of the star, of the moon, of the moving waters, of the

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

snow on mountains and moor—images vast, exalted and austere; he colors the lofty mood which attends these images by words and phrases connoting religion or religious ceremonial—‘Eremitic,’ ‘priest-like task,’ ‘pure ablution’; until our emotion, having passed through these introductory disciplines, is purified to interpret correctly the poet’s wish.”

These words of a great teacher of poetry illumine more than the verses under discussion; they open a vista of that sort of skill in managing the reader and in allowing for the way words and images are understood, which was the special gift of Keats. After Mr. Woodberry has shown the method, it is easy to read other things in Keats, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, or the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, for example. In *The Eve of St. Agnes* we have a story of exquisite delicacy, which must be told

THE KINDS OF POETRY

with delicacy if told at all. Porphyro, the lover, knowing that Madeleine hopes that night to dream of her future husband, resolves that she shall dream of him, or at least think she is dreaming of him. He therefore conceals himself in her room until she is asleep, and then with the soft chords of the lute he wakes her so gently that she sees him before she can distinguish the dream from the waking. She has really been dreaming of him, and now the actual Porphyro seems only the lover of her vision, turned suddenly pallid. The difficulty of the story lies, of course, in the hiding of Porphyro in Madeleine's room, but Keats ennobled the scene, as he secured the meaning of his sonnet, by manipulating in advance the emotions of his readers. Madeleine's room has a window of stained glass; when she enters the door her candle—her "taper," as Keats

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

calls it—sends up its smoke in the pale moonshine, as if before an altar; the light of the moon falls on the silver cross she wears, and gives her hair a glory, like a saint's; her robes fall to her knees, and she slips into her "soft and chilly nest" as though her soul were a missal clasped, or a rose shut, to be a bud again. So managed, the reader takes the scene as Keats intended, and the disrobing of Madeleine is one of the clear purities of literature. But after Madeleine is awake and Porphyro has declared his passion, how is the poet to get her up and dressed, without breaking altogether the spell of the story! Even to suggest the question would be disastrous. Keats has the lovers out of the castle before we can think of the problem, if ever we do think of it; he lets the speed of the narrative sweep us over the danger before we know it is there.

THE KINDS OF POETRY

The *Ode on a Grecian Urn* exhibits, I think, an even more wonderful knowledge of human nature. The poet describes the two scenes painted on the urn, first rendering them as though they were actual life, and then contemplating their immortality in art. Most readers would say that the method is the same for both sides of the urn—first the picture, then the praise of its immortality. But the subject-matter of the paintings was not amenable to this treatment, and Keats allowed for a difference between one scene and the other. On one side of the urn a shepherd is piping, and a youth pursues a maiden. The painter has arrested forever in an attitude of beauty the swift flow of these experiences.

“Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not
leave

Thy song, nor ever can those leaves be bare;

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not
grieve;

She cannot fade, though thou have not thy
bliss,

For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!”

With this picture of things which the memory would gladly linger on, the poet knows we shall have no quarrel. On the other side of the urn, however, is painted a heifer led to sacrifice. If this picture to be immortal? Shall we contemplate forever the priest about to slaughter the victim? Keats again gives us no opportunity to raise the question. With the poetic tact in which he is without a superior, he turns rather to a scene not represented on the urn, calls up the image of the village from which the sacrificial procession has come, makes us feel in a phrase the silence of the village streets, thus deserted, and

THE KINDS OF POETRY

then contemplates the immortality of that lovely silence and solitude.

“What little town by river or sea shore
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou are desolate, can e'er return.”

These poems of Keats may be interpreted by a wisdom of life that in its simplicity seems rather the happy wit of experience than a system of thought. But more formal philosophy also may guide us from poet to poet. George Santayana's great sentence, that all life is animal in its origin and spiritual in its possible fruits, has given to many of us a scale against which to judge the complete poet, and also the poet who reports only our animal origins, or only our spiritual

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

fruits. If all life has a natural basis, then any art which tells the whole truth of life must portray that basis; and if life has also spiritual ends, then no art is complete which fails to portray those ends. The love of Romeo and Juliet is of course based on such a natural desire as starts youth always to seeking its mate; Dame Nature seems to preside with as much puissance in Shakspeare's drama as in Chaucer's allegory of St. Valentine's day. But Romeo and Juliet differ, let us say from Antony and Cleopatra, in that their union has a meaning also for the mind and the heart. Shakspeare, reading life by a sound philosophy, comes at the truth that when we begin to be aware of a spiritual end in experience, the animal basis of it somewhat drops away from our thoughts; when we are truly in love, therefore, our passion seems to us a yearning chiefly or

THE KINDS OF POETRY

only of the soul. By this illusion, itself as natural as breathing, the hearts of men and women bestow upon the world a significance which without us it would not have, so far as we can see. Nor should we have occasion to feel this consecration of spirit, so far as we know, were we out of touch with the natural world. The poet who like Dante has gathered vast spiritual meanings from comparatively meager experiences in nature, and who tells us those meanings without initiating us into the natural basis of them, will prove for all but the rarest of readers a difficult poet—lofty and admirable, but not easily located in the world we know, not even in its heights. The poet should not separate himself from our world; rather, his art should rise upon it.

And his art should rise. We will not listen without protest to a mere recount-

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

ing of those animal or material facts which, though undeniable, are soonest forgotten when we begin to consider the meaning of existence. It is a cheap trick of the so-called realist to strip away the spiritual raiment of life, that he may startle us with the sight of unaccommodated man. This is the one nudity which is unbearable. Our first parents faced it when, having sinned, they became realists, and were ashamed of themselves. "A lovely complexion is nothing but good digestion; why lose your heart to the efficiency of the digestive tract?" says the realist to the lover. "A violin is only a hollow box, strung with cat-gut and scratched on with horse-hair; why be stirred by Kreisler's playing?" says the realist to the musician. "A flag is but a cloth, cotton or silk; why die for your country?" says the realist to the patriot. Life thus con-

THE KINDS OF POETRY

sidered, exclusively in its physical bases, as if it had no spiritual ends, would seem indeed a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing. Those who are tired of the world may like such a portrait of it. The sane man takes life as a whole, as a complement of body and spirit, and he gives his affection to that poetry which follows the spirit, yet neither forgets nor dishonors the body.

V

But let us return to our beginning. If our teaching of poetry springs from our delight in it, if we are not unwilling to read widely in the whole experience of the race, if we can recover from history something of the past and can learn from philosophy to understand the present, what more shall we add? Only this—to be still

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

as we were at the beginning, lovers of poetry. It was from the example of our teachers that we learned most. Together with the historian and the scientist they felt the lure of scholarship, but we looked to our teachers of poetry not for scholarship alone. If we are to give our own students what they look for, we must keep fresh in ourselves, as we grow older, a capacity for that poetic experience which lighted our youth. No human task is easier or more beautiful. Or is it a task, or only a happy way of life? Plato described it for us. "Wise men are not philosophers," said the prophetess, "for they already have wisdom; and ignorant men are not philosophers, for being ignorant they do not know their need of wisdom." "Who then are philosophers?" cried Socrates. "Those intermediate persons among whom is Love."

BOOK IV

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

I

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

I

THE quarrel with indecent art is an old one, and the present discussion of improper books, with threats of censorship, begins to rally itself in two familiar camps—on one side the moralists, showing in the heat of debate less understanding of art than they probably have, and on the other side the writers, showing in the same heat somewhat less concern for morals than it is to be hoped they feel. The censorious seem disposed to suppress on the ground of indecency almost any kind of book they happen not to like; the writers seem at times to argue that all

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

books are equally good, or, at least, should be free and equal. These are the old exaggerations of the quarrel. Yet in two important respects the present discussion is quite novel and more than usually interesting; for one thing, the attack now is less on obscenity, about which there are no two opinions, than on indecency, of which we have at the moment no adequate definition; for another thing, the writers themselves, perhaps for the first time in history, have no definition of literary decency to offer, and seem not greatly interested in forming one.

Censorships are usually exercised for the protection of religious or political doctrine, and whatever may be said against the method, at least in the field of religion or politics the censor knows clearly what he wishes to protect. But if we now would protect decency, we must first define the term. It is not enough to

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

have a moral conviction on the subject; we must have also some principle outside of our emotional prejudices, based on something more lasting than fashion. In the present welter of contradictions and opprobrium it is sometimes thought indecent to wear bobbed hair or short skirts; for the morals of the school, teachers have been dismissed who rolled their stockings below the knee. Obviously, these are not great faults in decency, if faults at all; a good deal of camel must have been swallowed before justice could be done to these gnats. Some of our neighbors wish to suppress certain plays; others wish to suppress the theatre. Some wish to suppress Swinburne and Baudelaire, with one hand as it were, while distributing with the other copies of the Bible containing the *Song of Songs*. A minister of this type, earnest in his work for decency and quite muddled as to what it is, told me

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

that he could not give his approval to the *Spoon River Anthology*, brilliant though it was; he could approve of no book that portrayed fornication. Yet he must have read the story of Lot's daughters and their behavior with their father. He approved of the Bible, and he would probably not call it indecent. What is decency, then, or its opposite?

At this point the writers ought to stand up and answer. In other ages they would have done so; they would have thought no one so competent as the artist to define decency in his own field, and they would have stated their definition from the point of view of art. They would have called it "decorum" instead of "decency", but they would have meant the same thing—fitness or propriety in the particular art they practised. When Milton made his famous plea on ethical grounds for freedom of the press, he went on, as an artist, to say that

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

of course there are good and bad books, and when a book has had its chance, it must submit to the judgment of the competent. He was writing in an age when the reader might be expected to have some training in artistic definitions of decorum. If books are to enjoy freedom of publication now, it seems incumbent upon the writers to define the decency of their art, and to spread the knowledge of the definition, as widely as possible, that the competent reader of today may have a standard by which to judge.

II

It ought to be possible now, as it once was, to define decency in terms outside our emotions, not variable with our private taste but fixed in the conditions of the artist's work. When man is inspired by the world he sees to make some lasting record of his feeling about it, and selects a medium to express himself in,—wood, stone, metal, color, language,—he immediately encounters certain problems and difficulties in his medium, certain limitations in it which he must submit to, if he would convey his meaning with precision. The limitations of his medium, therefore, dictate to the artist his first lessons in decorum. For if you will not respect those limitations, you will find yourself saying

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

what you did not intend; instead of beauty, you will convey some effect humorous or grotesque or ugly. It is at least bearable to see actual garments on the wax figures in shop-windows; we dress up dolls. But not even the shop window could tolerate a marble statue with clothes on. When the artist learns that some things, though excellent in themselves, do not come out in his medium with the effect he desires, his good sense and the sincerity of his art compel him to leave these subjects for other mediums. The themes he thus abandons are not indecent in the sense of obscenity or filth, not bad in themselves, but they do not fit his art—or, as writers used to say, do not belong to its decorum.

The decorum of art may seem to the moralist far less important than the decency his own strong emotions feel after, but the moralist is wrong. The decorum

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

of art is the deeper kind of decency, for it is based on lasting principles, and it leads to an understanding of the positive good in art, to beauty, as the moralist's concern for decency often does not. You cannot explain on moral grounds why the glorification of the body in Walt Whitman, let us say, is sometimes disconcerting, yet the glorification of it in Greek sculpture seems not only decent but noble. The artist could explain the matter if he understood the decorum of artistic mediums. In so far as he does not understand it, he adds to the confusion of the arts in our time; he fills our magazines, for example, with photographs of Greek dances, and is himself, let us hope, disturbed by the grotesque contortions he has perpetuated. The dance was probably a graceful flow of motion; of all that flow, however, only a few moments would be in the decorum of the camera—moments of poise, in which

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

motion might be suggested but not represented. But the photographer was charmed by the moments of motion, which are the essence of dance decorum, and he gives us a picture of grim-faced ladies suspended in the air, with frantic gestures of fingers and toes.

In literature, since the medium is language, decorum is a question of the limitations and capacities of words. The great limitation of language is that it must be heard or read one word at a time, though most of the things we wish to speak of in this world should be thought of or seen all at once, and their true outline and their total effect may be dislocated by piecemeal expression. To represent in language a landscape or a person, a building or any intellectual architecture, is, strictly speaking, impossible; we can merely make statements, carefully selected, about the subject, and trust that

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

no matter how dismembered in the telling, it will somehow come together again in the hearer's mind, thanks largely to the hearer's imagination. Where the suggestion is so slight and the collaboration so great, the writer is under some obligation to be precise and conscientious in what he suggests. His responsibility might perhaps seem less when he is telling a story; if language is inapt for the portrayal of stationary things having mass, structure and extent, we might suppose it better fitted to the representation of action, which like language occurs in sequence of time. But even in the recital of events, language has to name separately in an artificial order events which actually coincide, and the reader's imagination must put the fragments together again. "*Indeed,*" replied Mr. Jones, or, Mr. Jones replied, "*Indeed!*" Neither formula quite represents what happened. In life, when

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

we heard the "Indeed!" the sound would tell us not only what was said but also who said it. No wonder the poets have so often thought of the drama as the most satisfying literary form, for when a play is acted, words convey in it all that they can convey in life, and they are aided, as in life, by other kinds of language—by gesture, facial expression, scenery, which speak to the eye while the voice is speaking to the ear.

Because words must be spoken one after another, there are not only some things which are hard to say in that medium, but others which in certain circumstances should not be said at all. No matter how much we select the sounds, our utterance will lay a fairly even emphasis on all the things we name; therefore, if we wish to subordinate some part of the picture, to pass over it with no emphasis at all, we cannot throw it into

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

shadow, as a painter can—we must leave it out altogether. A painter may portray a face half in shadow, so that one ear is barely discernible; looking at the picture you do not see the shadowed ear, and do not miss it. But if some one tells you in words that the ear is in shadow, at once the ear enjoys special emphasis, the opposite of the painter's intention. Or suppose the portrait is not shadowed, but all the features are clear; and suppose the artist has focused your attention on the eyes, or has brought out some characteristic expression. You can attend to the picture exactly as you look at the subject in life—noticing what is important in it, but not examining it otherwise in detail. The head has two ears, but you do not count them. If, however, the writer describes the face as it is in life, or as it is in the portrait, he may speak only of the chief focus or expression of it; he must

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

not say that the subject has two ears. If he does so, he will be indecent in his art, and may seem to the original of the portrait insulting in his manners.

All literary accounts of the human body raise this problem, not a problem of squeamishness or puritanism, but of decorum. The classical Greeks seem to have mastered the question either by instinctive good taste or by analysis, as they mastered so many other problems in art with which we are only beginning to wrestle. They cannot be accused of prudishness where the body is concerned; they loved its naked beauty, and in their sculpture they portrayed it frankly, with a serious and unflagging delight. Yet in their poetry they did not portray it; they merely noted the total effect of physical beauty, and omitted details, as we should omit the number of ears in the portrait. In the classical Homer, to be sure, there

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

remained even after much expurgating certain stereotyped labels of the body; goddesses are "ox-eyed", beautiful women are "deep-bosomed." But the phrases are so conventional that they probably called up a general sense of approval, rather than a specific detail, as the word "mortals" calls up to us the general idea of men, rather than the fact of death. Aside from such phrases Homer and the other classical poets suggest the body without detail, trying to render the general effect the body makes in life—its femininity, its masculinity—at the same time avoiding any such attention to anatomical detail as in real life would seem, to the Greek and to us, morbid or clinical. The sculptor, working in another medium, can use the details the poet must omit; when we look at his Apollo or his Aphrodite we see not a naked body but a divine presence. The effect of divinity is not furnished by any

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

anatomical member, nor interfered with by any. The body in detail is before us, but the expression, the something divine we feel, is in the attitude or the character. The wise poet, knowing the limitations and dangers of his medium, tries to reproduce only the attitude or the character. Later sculptors, in the decadence that followed the Periclean age, deserted the decorum of their own medium, and called attention to separate parts of the body—to ribs or veins, neck or breasts. In literature a parallel decadence occurred; the poets tried to give the effect of beauty, not in Homer's way, by avoiding physical detail, but by citing it. They managed to suggest not beauty but sex.

The modern lover of beauty who quite properly wishes to restore the body to its rightful honor and reverence, usually appeals to the Greeks for his precedent. But if he wishes to celebrate the body in

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

detail, he should appeal not to the Greeks but to the poets of the Renaissance. The praise of the body in the Renaissance is sometimes explained as springing from a newly recovered delight in material beauty. It should also be explained as a reaction, on the part of earnest, even puritanical moralists, against other moralists who, they thought, viewed life but partially and cramped the human soul. In our own language, Edmund Spenser and John Milton led in this praise of beauty—moralists both; as in modern times Walt Whitman led the praise, a moralist also, whether or not his detractors admit it. But a moral purpose is a dangerous approach to art, whether you are a critic or a poet. Whitman is perhaps the easiest illustration to begin with. He felt that to the pure every part of the body is sacred, and at its best is a thing of beauty. Had he been a sculptor, he would have

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

proceeded to make statues which probably would have shocked nobody. Working in language, however, he mistook the decorum of the art, and wrote as though he were sculptor or painter, and the result is in those anatomical catalogues from which no beauty emerges, whatever else does. He differs as widely as possible from Edmund Spenser in most things, but in this one matter they are alike. Milton was too close to the Greeks to go wrong, even with his moral impulse to assert the honor of the body; his impassioned praise of wedded love, and his remarks on the glory of nakedness when Adam and Eve first appear in his epic, put no strain on literary decorum. But Spenser's moral enthusiasm for beauty leads to such physical inventories as his picture of Belphebe, in the second book of the *Faerie Queene*, or of his own bride, in the *Amoretti* and the *Epithalamium*—an accounting of eyes,

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

teeth, hair, neck, shoulders, breasts, waist, arms and legs. Many a critic has suggested that his poems have the character of painting or of tapestry, and had he actually worked in a pictorial medium, he would have made the effect he desired. In his portrait of Serena naked among the savages, in the sixth book of the *Faerie Queene*, he followed Homer's method with admirable success. No English poet is more spiritual than he—all the more impressive the indecorum to which his moral earnestness occasionally brought him, and all the more helpful his example ought to be to modern beauty-lovers who fancy that the decorum of an art need not be studied and obeyed.

Through ignorance of decorum in language a moralist sometimes comes to grief in the opposite direction; wishing to indicate indecency, he sometimes through reticence stumbles upon the Homeric method

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

and portrays beauty instead. A while ago a minister of some name, an aggressive defender of decency, preached a sermon on the dangers which at the moment he saw threatening us from the arts. According to the newspapers, he said that if certain theatrical managers could get it by the police, we should have a show in which a naked woman in one scene posed before a black velvet curtain. Wishing to touch the sulphurous subject as gingerly as possible, he merely suggested the lovely contrast of body and background; those of his congregation who had seen it forgot their moral danger and remembered the Venus de Milo in the Louvre. It occurred to some of them that this material might be indecorous in the pulpit; in the theatre, however—well, they were not unwilling to see it, if it was actually put on.

III

The principle of literary decorum which applies to the representation of the body applies also to the allied theme of sex. The body is a fit subject for literature, but not in detail. Sex is a proper subject for literature, so long as it is represented as a general force in life, and particular instances of it are decent so long as they illustrate that general force and turn our minds to it; but sexual actions are indecent when they cease to illustrate the general fact of sex, and are studied for their own sake; like the ears in the portrait, they then assume an emphasis they do not deserve. This seems to be the decorum of the theme as great writers have treated it, and this is the decorum

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

which men instinctively adopt in discussion, if they have not been trained to think that all discussion of sex is naughty. People so trained will call any book indecent which in any way touches the theme. When *Trilby* appeared years ago, many of us then youngsters were protected (in vain) from the lovely story because Trilby had been somebody's mistress before the romance began. So to an earlier generation *The Scarlet Letter* had seemed dangerous because Hester Prynne's child was illegitimate. But neither book had physical passion for its theme, though the force of sex in life, for good or evil, gave each story most of its interest and its pathos. How indecent in the artistic sense, how indecorous, either book might have been, we realize by supposing that Du Maurier had centred attention on Trilby's early and sordid affairs, before she met her true love, or that Hawthorne had given us in

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

detail the experiences of Hester in Arthur Dimmesdale's arms. One has an uneasy feeling that so the books might have been written today; the general fact of sex and its influence would not operate as a colossal force in the story, but would be deduced in an argument or assumed as an hypothesis—modern specialists in sex are so uncertain of its existence—and the focus would have been on the animal behavior of human beings, which the hypothesis of sex would explain. This kind of book is indecent, though it is usually too psychological in manner to disturb the censorious, and entirely too frequent in recent literature to suppress.

We turn for relief to the decorum of great literature. "From the roof David saw a woman washing herself, and the woman was very beautiful to look upon." The painter might give the details of that beauty; the writer could not. But he

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

could continue: "And David sent and inquired after the woman. And one said, Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite? And David sent messengers and took her, and she came in unto him, and he lay with her; and she returned unto her house. And the woman conceived, and sent and told David, and said, I am with child. And David sent to Joab, saying, Send me Uriah the Hittite." So begins one of the greatest of stories from both points of view, artistic and moral. Is it too frank for our taste? Would the minister who described so well the naked woman and the black velvet, set this story also before his congregation? He ought to, for it is a masterpiece of decency. David's passion, Bathsheba's acceptance of it and her consequent terror, were important only as beginning the spiritual tragedy; the old writer names the facts and passes on to

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

his great subject. To have begun less frankly would have been to misrepresent life and spoil the moral; to have elaborated the scene of David's love-making would have been indecent. In the same decorum the classical Greeks told their stories; Helen eloped with Paris; Ædipus had children by his own mother; Clytemnestra killed her husband and made her lover king—so much of the fact is necessary in each case to understand the magnificent and tragic consequences; but the Greek poets did not pry further into the details of passion.

There are, of course, unhealthy minds which have developed a mania for obscenity, and at the other extreme of exaggeration there are the unbalanced minds which do not care to admit the existence of sex. But sex, in one form or another, is in the thoughts of most people most of the time, and common folk—and

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

the great poets—speak of it constantly, and in the same way. In unsophisticated society, among sincere and simple men, the references to sex are at once reticent and frank; it is recognized and respected as gravitation might be or as the sea is by sailors—as a power always immanent, in contact with which men may be lost or saved. Gossip in that kind of society may whisper that such a girl had a child by such a boy only a month after their wedding, or that so and so is not really the son of his supposed father. Exactly this kind of scandal furnishes material to Homer and to the old prophets in the Bible, to Dante and to Shakespeare, for sex is one of the permanent sides of our moral world. If this treatment of it is essential to a complete picture of life, the thinness of American literature may well come from lack of frankness; but current attempts to correct the thinness by dwelling

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

on physical details are seeking frankness in the wrong direction and are but so many offenses against literary decorum. One reason why we cling with such pride to *The Scarlet Letter* is that with all its shortcomings as a novel it bases its great moral vision on just such a complete and decent observation of life as our books do not usually give us.

IV

In this discussion of sex our attention has shifted from the problem of language to the question of the general and the particular in art—that is, from the principle of decorum involving the medium of literature to the principle of decorum involving its subject-matter. This second principle, rightly understood, marks the chief difference between contemporary art and what some of us still believe was the great art of the world hitherto—the best of the Greek, the best of the medieval. When you look at life naturally, in the directions dictated by your spontaneous impulses, it is your own life that seems important, your private fortunes, your personal ambitions. Everything that belongs to you

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

seems peculiar, because it is not natural at first to compare the lives of others with our own. A poet who presents experience from this angle of individuality will always make a strong initial appeal and perhaps a lasting one, since he falls in with our instincts, and this accord will seem to us evidence of something profound. Such a poet, to some extent, was Euripides, who imagined his characters sympathetically from their private points of view, and portrayed for us the egotism of human nature in its most tragic form. It is not fair to say that in his world men and women need only to explain themselves in order to be right; but, at least, after they have explained themselves it is hard to tell who are right and who are wrong. Such another poet is Browning, who represents human nature one individual at a time, always from the individual's point of view. By such a simple and primitive method

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

he obtains effects of obvious richness—he shows how varied life is, since there are so many individuals in it, and how novel it perpetually must be, since each of us is discovering the world for the first time, and how much right there is in every man's cause, once he has the chance to speak for himself. If we had all the works of Euripides, we should probably find in them as rich and varied a world as Browning's, expressed with clearer and more direct poetic genius. Our contemporary taste is rather solidly for this kind of literature—Browning flourishes more and more, and Euripides has been revived; and if you really approve of the individualistic approach to art, it is hard to see how you can call anything indecent. Anything that is natural to any kind of character must get a hearing.

But men can also be imaginative enough to look at life as a whole—first, perhaps,

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

to look out at all other men, and then to stand off and look at all men, oneself included. When you begin to take an interest in other men, you notice of course that their lives are not like yours, not so important nor interesting nor promising, but in their drabness they are all curiously alike; they all, with slight variation, are born, are brought up, fall in love according to their lights, marry, earn their living, have children, grow old, and die. When this uniformity begins to interest you, you are making your first intelligent acquaintance with life; and when you have looked at mankind and included yourself in the picture, when you have admitted however reluctantly that the single addition does not change the total effect, that life is still simple and uniform and that you are less peculiar than you thought—then you have seen yourself at last as one of the human race.

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

To see this calls for imagination and for the Greek virtue which we translate as magnanimity—great-mindedness. The virtue is not to be acquired all at once. We have made a great advance when we can think of life in terms not of ourselves but of moral and material aspects and powers—in terms of youth and age, for example, of strength or beauty or pride. This is the allegorical stage of our pilgrimage in wisdom, no mean stage to reach, though it happens to be out of fashion just now. We are acquainted with it in the old morality plays, especially in the almost popular *Everyman*, and perhaps in Æschylus, especially in *Prometheus Bound*.

But our advance is greatest when we can recognize these aspects and powers in the individuals around us—when our observation includes at one and the same time the general truths of life and the

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

particular instances. The poet preëminently master of this sane wisdom was Sophocles, who, in Arnold's familiar phrase, saw life steadily and saw it whole. The point of view which he represented is the most magnanimous, the least egotistical, that art has yet taken, and one would have to think meanly of the race to believe that we shall not return to it, as to the noblest part of the Greek legacy. But Sophocles was only the illustration of a decorum generally practised. In the brief and magnificent period which left us our greatest perfection in the arts, the Athenians thought of the individual as important if he illustrated for the moment the general truths or fortunes of life, but his strictly private fate was insignificant.

This attitude has been explained by saying that the Greeks, having no gift for introspection, took always an objective view of life, but such a formula hardly ac-

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

counts for all the illustrations of magnanimity. When Athens was in her glory, for example, it was only the public buildings that were glorious; no individual, not even Pericles himself, thought of putting Phidias to decorate his private home. Again, in the *Antigone* Sophocles is introspective enough—as introspective as Euripides or Ibsen himself—but the introspection is concerned with the general theme of piety, of one's duty to blood relations, not at all with the love story of Antigone. She was betrothed to the son of the king who condemned her to death, and the fact proves tragic for the son and for the king, but the love of the two young people is their private business, and the poet therefore does not let his heroine discuss the problem of piety from that point of view.

It was the genius of Shakespeare and of Molière, even in comedy, to preserve

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

the same decorum. They show us those aspects of man's fortune which are of interest to all men; of course we are free to fill in the gaps according to our taste in gossip, but the dramatist awakens our feelings and calls our attention only to general experiences and common wisdom. In Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* is a good example, a noble tragedy and a decent play. It is less glorious than the *Antigone*, obviously, since it shows human nature resisting temptation rather than establishing an ideal, but the grimness of its subject and the fact that it portrays an indecent character do not make it indecent, as some critics think. Its power is its probing into general truths of life, chiefly into the capriciousness of temptation where sex is concerned, and into the various forms of the fear of death.

Claudio, condemned to die and convinced that there is no hope, persuades

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

himself that he does not care to live; but immediately he has a chance to live at the cost of his sister's honor, and he finds himself slipping into casuistry to make his escape possible even on such terms. Here is introspection of the Sophoclean sort, touching the psychology not of a particular man but of all of us. Walter Pater remarked the paradox that Angelo is tempted to his fall by sight of the pure-minded Isabella, the incarnation of virtue. He might have named other paradoxes of Isabella's influence. She fascinates all the men she meets, good or bad. At the end of the play the Duke announces that he intends to marry her himself, and since he gives her little opportunity to dispute this plan, we may speculate how far his motives differ essentially from Angelo's. But Lucio, the wretch so steeped by habit in indecency that he can hardly frame a clean sentence, is immediately and perma-

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

nently sensitive to Isabella's beauty of soul as well as of body. Why? Shakespeare merely exhibits the paradox, in his characteristic way, without hint of explanation. But we may read a lesson in decorum, if we wish, in the decency of art, from the first speech of Lucio to Isabella in the nunnery, when the dirty-minded wretch, having none but coarse formulas in his vocabulary, tries to address her with the reverence he feels.

V

On all this the moralist may comment that decency as a matter of art is one thing, and the protection of public morals is another; that however artists may be interested in the decorum of their medium, or in the general truth of their subject-matter, the public is also interested in the motives and the possible effects of their writing. Granted; but if the moral point is to be made, as against the artistic, the artist has his own conclusions to draw. The first is that one may as reasonably question the motives of the vice-suppressors as the motives of the artists. Better not to question the motives of either, but if the mean insinuation begins, it must in justice spread in both direc-

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

tions. The woman before the velvet curtain, described by the preacher, seemed a vision of loveliness; yes, you may say, but what would be the motives of those who produce such an exhibition—worship of beauty, or wish to capitalize our baser impulses? The question is unanswerable unless you can see into men's hearts, but it applies also to the minister who preached the sermon; was he interested only in morals, or was he capitalizing to some extent our craving for the sensational? An artist would be content to answer that where the result is beautiful, in the decorum of the art, it is sensible as well as kind to suppose men's motives of the best; and when the result is not beautiful, it is sufficient to condemn the result, without reference to the motives.

But the more actively censorious hold that the weak need to be saved from themselves; that a constant brooding upon in-

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

decencies is the death of the soul. Well, if it is obscenity that we war against, by all means root it out, for it can be recognized at a glance, and the reformer need not brood long upon it. But in the realm of art in which decency rises, the suppression of indecency involves as much brooding on it by the reformer as by the endangered public—in fact, the reformer must specialize in such brooding. Whether or not it is to the death of his soul, it seems to be to the impairment of his taste. You cannot give all your time to bad art and know much about good. The rôle of the censor would take on some dignity if there ever were a censor who was a connoisseur, who was the patron of good poets and painters, who actively supported a clean stage. But then, if you had the taste for the best, no inducement whatever would make you give your life to the detection of indecency.

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

Human nature is wiser in the long run than any censor; in the long run the books of the highest decency hold their place in fame by crowding out the others. The public suppresses indecent books by reading decent ones. Every artist would respectfully suggest this method to all censors. Perhaps the censors will say that the method is too slow—that it takes too long for the good books to crowd out the others. It does take too long now, but why not hasten the process by calling attention to the good books, instead of delaying it by advertising the bad? If the energy which now tries to suppress books sure to be forgotten in fifty years, were directed to the encouragement of the few books which after fifty years might still be worth reading, the final verdict of fame might be hastened. But there seems to be a decorum in morals too, or perhaps

DECENCY IN LITERATURE

two decorums, a creative and a negative—
one seeking to displace evil by a positive
good, the other too much preoccupied with
the evil to notice the good at all.

**ORIGINALITY
IN LITERATURE**

II

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

I

IF we accept the doctrine of criticism today, originality is a great virtue in a writer, and if we believe the book advertisements, all the new writers as they appear, and as they reappear, have this virtue to a striking, even to an explosive extent. But with all their originality, some of the new books turn out to be dull, and if we reconsider for a moment the books men have finally judged great, we observe that they were rather destitute of the kind of originality we talk of nowadays.

“In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea”, wrote the imagist some time ago,

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

defending the use of free verse. The doctrine was in the interest of the cadence, but it implied something larger and more significant, that in poetry newness of ideas is desirable. More recently, an American critic remarked, in effect, that what Lytton Strachey has accomplished in his literary portraits is nothing but what Gamaliel Bradford accomplished in his, and since Mr. Bradford's portraits came first, they should have the credit and the praise which an indiscriminating world bestows on Mr. Strachey's. If the question of priority is raised in this kind of writing, perhaps something should be said for Plutarch; but are we sure we should raise the question of priority? What arrests us in the remark of the American critic is the undebated assumption that literary excellence derives from doing something before somebody else does it. Is it the business of art to discover new ideas, or indeed to

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

busy itself much with any ideas, as separated from emotion and the other elements of complete experience? Is it the originality of genius in art to say something no one has ever thought of before, or to say something we all recognize as important and true? As for the mere question of priority, even stupid things have been said for a first time; do we wear the laurel for being the first to say them?

One suspects that the new cadence will persist in poetry only if we like it, and that Mr. Bradford's reputation will outstrip Mr. Strachey's only if we prefer what he wrote, and if by chance we care for neither, then both will be neglected, though one preceded the other by a hundred years. Excellence is the only originality that art considers. They understand these things better in France. There the young poet even of the most radical school will respect the bias of art towards continuity rather

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

than toward novelty, toward the climax of a tradition rather than its beginning; his formula of self-confidence will be, "Victor Hugo was a great poet, Alfred de Musset was a great poet, and now at last I'm here." But in America the parallel gospel is, "Poor Tennyson couldn't write, nor Longfellow, of course; now for the first time let's have some poetry."

The writers finally judged great, so far from sharing our present concern for originality, would probably not even understand it. What is the object of literature? they would ask. Of course, if it is to portray the individual rather than human nature, or those aspects of life which stand apart from life in general, then each book may have something queer in it, something not in any other book and in that sense original; but then the reader, before long, will be looking for peculiarity in every book he buys—it must be, not

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

better, but "different", to use an American term in esthetics; and the writer then who would meet this demand for the peculiar must make a fresh start with every book. What bad luck, they would say, to be forever a primitive, to be condemned, after every success, to produce something in another vein, the first of its kind. Originality in this sense will be continually undermined by fame, for the more an author is read, and the more people become accustomed to his world, the less he will seem original. On the other hand, if the reader looks for originality, there will be no fame, for no matter how popular an author is, we shall read his book only once, and then be waiting for his next novelty.

But if the object of literature is still, as it was for the great writers, to portray human nature, then the only new thing the artist will look for is a greater success in his art. Human nature is old and

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

unchangeable; he will hope to make a better portrait than has yet been made—better, at any rate, for his own people and his own age, and if possible better absolutely. There is nothing new about religion or love or friendship, war, sunsets, the sea, danger or death, yet something remains to be told of each eternal theme, and when a book comes which tells the whole, which satisfies some hitherto unexpressed yearnings or defines more sharply something hitherto half-seen, then that portrait of human nature serves our purposes until we have a still finer, and other versions meanwhile are neglected and forgotten. We remember how many accounts of Romeo and Juliet there were before Shakespeare told the story to suit us, and how many records of the journey to hell before Dante told us the whole truth of that pilgrimage; perhaps we know the many desperate attempts, long since mer-

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

cifully swallowed up in oblivion, to portray the American Indian before Fenimore Cooper made the picture the world wanted. The achievements of literature are all, as in these instances, a gradual reworking of traditional or popular or folk material, and in the process it is precisely because the subject is not original that the audience can decide how well it has been portrayed. A sequence of writers interpreting life are therefore like a succession of virtuosos playing the classics, each trying to give us the true Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Schumann. Their renderings will be different enough, but the music is the same, and we know it by heart. The player who calls our attention to most beauty in it, will be original or unique in the only way that art permits.

The example of the musician may not seem to all writers a fair parallel; they may protest that the writer creates, as the

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

composer does, but the player only interprets what is already created. But they are wrong, and the parallel is correct. The writer does not create as the composer does. Music is an ultimate pleasure in itself, like the taste of sugar; so long as it delights us, we do not ask what it means. Moreover, since there is no question of its meaning, we may not need a previous experience to find some enjoyment in it; it may be satisfactory at first contact. Of course every art gives a more subtle pleasure as we become practised in appreciating it, yet the contrast between music and literature remains a real one, since without any knowledge of life at all men and even children often penetrate deeply into the heart of music, but without some knowledge of life they are stopped at the very threshold of literature. The key to that door is some first-hand acquaintance with life. Music has no other subject-mat-

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

ter than itself, but literature has life for its content, and to find one's way about in it, we must recognize what it is dealing with. Life is a music already composed. It has been here a long time, and had become already an ancient history when the first poets began to play upon it. They merely said for us the things we had been vainly feeling after, they brought out the colors our eyes had almost missed, they defined sharply the flavors and the half tastes that had haunted us. The amateurs in the audience listen spellbound when the master plays to perfection a piece they have struggled with; this is more to them than the loveliest of new sonatas, for it is their own world in a better light. So mankind will listen to the authentic poet who completes their half-realized selves; and will say of him, somewhat with the woman of Samaria, "He told me all the things that ever I did."

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

If the audience enjoy the music best when they have tried to play it themselves, they love it next best when they have heard it often, and they like it least, sometimes not at all, when they hear it for the first time. The reader likes poetry best when he has lived what it interprets; next best when he has heard often of the adventures it renders; least, even to the point of detestation, when he never entered that region of life at all, not even by hearsay. In such a predicament the real ground of his objection to the art is that it is original, at least so far as he is concerned, but the experience of his discomfort will hide the cause of it from him; not himself but the art will seem to him inadequate—is he not as much alive as any one ever was? The book, he will say, portrays a world that is dead. Let us start fresh and be original; let us portray my world.

II

In the slow fermentation of human societies, as fresh elements work their way to the top and for a time give their flavor to history, the new arrival is likely to herald himself in some such terms in a protest against the art which, because he has as yet no share in it, seems to him old and worn out, and in a cry for original expression which to those with a longer memory of the world will be quite familiar. There have been new arrivals before, and their wish to start fresh is the cause rather than the result of decadence. For it is only in a figure of speech that art declines or prospers—it is the artists who are less competent or more so than their predecessors, and the poet who tells us that the

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

period before him is at an end, is really proclaiming that he cannot improve upon it, and if the other poets are like himself, the preceding period is indeed ended. There is no other reason why the great moments of literature were not prolonged. Shakespeare was better than his predecessors, but he was not perfection; why did not the drama continue to develop? Ben Jonson, being himself a new arrival, and being, for all his book learning, outside the spiritual regions which Elizabethan drama had mainly portrayed, thought of course that a new kind of art was needed. He is in danger now of sharing the ignominy of all writers who coming after greater men pay homage through jealousy. Tennyson was not the greatest of poets; why did not his successors treat him as though he were a Greene or a Marlowe, and make Shakespearean improvements in him? To hear the critics of today

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

rail against his art, one might suppose he had hopelessly damaged the language by using it, or that rhyme and meter had come to a bad end at his hands. The poet who talks this way about his predecessors is never the one who is conscious of the power to swallow them up. If Shakespeare had been a little man, he would have taken one look at Marlowe's *Faustus*, and given up the Elizabethan drama as a creaking and antiquated machine for moral doctrine. Had he been really ignorant of the long-stored-up energies and impulses which were coming to action in his marvellous hour, had he lacked the instinct to recognize them even when badly expressed, and to express them better, he might have walked the streets of London as the oriental arrival walked in Athens, or as the invader from the north walked in Rome—with a conviction that the day

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

of this sort of thing was over. Nothing would remain but to be original.

If the clamor for originality is strong in the United States, it is, perhaps, because here are many arrivals, and the newcomer not infrequently desires us to change our ways in the interest of his comfort. We have so much good will toward him, and we are so conscious of the fine things the various races may bring to our commonwealth, that we usually hesitate to speak frankly of his qualifications as writer or critic. He often brings a rare aptitude for art, and frequently he desires to write, but writing is the one art where his ignorance of life will handicap him. In painting an eye for color, in music an ear for tone and harmony, may carry him through, but in literature he will write in an acquired language, and even if it were his native tongue, in literature his attitude toward the art will be conditioned

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

by his knowledge of life. He will perhaps assert rather vigorously that his knowledge is superior; has he not borne hardships and risen above them? Those who have not suffered, he will say, know nothing of life. He will think you cold-blooded if you tell him the better way to say it—that those who have not suffered, know nothing of suffering. If he desires to write the literature of suffering, he is probably competent, but since he is usually a person of strong energy, with a constructive temperament, he does not wish to write merely the literature of suffering, nor does he usually wish his children to repeat his hardship, though he may have said that only by such discipline comes knowledge. He usually desires to write about the world in general, as every one would write, and for this task he usually has had experience too meagre or too special. It is only in the United States, after

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

his arrival, that he most often makes his first contact with the older literature—not of America but of his own land; if he has had the experience necessary for understanding it, he absorbs it eagerly, but if his hardships in his fatherland deprived him of the necessary equipment, he will announce that the old literature is played out and meaningless. He is like the native students in South African schools, who may read the skating episode in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, but cannot get the shiver of the ice or the scratch of the steel runners. Those who have been with us for several generations and who through economic or other causes have missed that rich acquaintance with life which would explain what the great writers talk about, are likely to join the most recent comer in a plea for originality. Their fortunes are to be pitied, but their advice in art is hardly to be followed. No amount of sym-

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

pathy or admiration for them as human beings will accredit them as critics, for art is long, as we have heard, and the approaches to it are long also; though we may teach democracy fast enough to win our vote after five years, we must know at first-hand youth and maturity, and have a suspicion of what old age is like, in the world the poet writes of, before we can give a fair opinion whether he has written well. But if the newcomer recovers here the adventure of life which his hardships cheated him of in the old country, he will find that the great literature of the world represents that adventure faithfully and vitally; it is merely a question of patience with him, since he is energetic and the upturn of the new world is exciting, and it is hard for him to believe that the old shadows in art of a life he has not yet lived will ever again take living form or pulse again in his imagination.

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

A new world, a new life, a new art. This is the sequence his hopes dwell on, though every term in it is debatable. Is there a new world, or a new life, or a new art? Sometimes we are told that in a new world life must automatically be new, but the doctrine is not convincing, for at other times we are summoned to originality, as to another duty, by the argument that in a new world we ought to be ashamed to lead still an old life. Sometimes we hear that a new life inevitably means a new art, and we reflect that if life now differs from what it once was, we need take no thought for our originality, for we shall be different in spite of ourselves; even by the old methods art will achieve something new; if we would write of love, for example, we need only tell the truth about the passion as we know it, and since the love we know is like nothing that ever was on sea or land, our romance will be like nothing

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

that ever was in song or story. Why all this fret about it? And if religion and war and sorrow and death are all by hypothesis quite other than they once were, how can we escape originality when we report them in the setting of the new world and the new life? But the fact is that those who call for originality in art are not quite sure, after all, that the age is a new one—they would feel safer if some further vestiges of the past could be obliterated; and though they justify a new art by speaking much of their new life, it is far from clear that they really think life is new, or at heart desire it to be so. Social and political systems, yes—but life? Horrible indeed is the vision of an absolutely original career for one who loves his fellows and prefers to take his experience outside a madhouse. “Your prayer is answered,” says the original Apollo, touching the original poet’s ears, trembling with originality: “you will

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

have always a new cadence and a new idea; neither the language nor the substance of your communications will ever have occurred before in human experience. Your art will be unique and solitary. Nothing that men have done before will you condescend to repeat—neither to sleep, nor to eat, nor to travel, nor to know passion, pain, suffering or peace.” The poet, lured by the prophecy, might think at last that he had achieved fame, but Apollo would be there to remind him that his was like no fame achieved before—not like Shelley’s or Shakespeare’s. He might lose his heart, and in the throes of love might fancy he knew at last the meaning of Romeo’s story or Tristram’s, but the god would remind him that his was a special kind of love, not like the very ancient impulse that moved the sun and the other stars.

We need some divine reminder that our

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

true desire is to realize in ourselves the best of old experience—not to find an original life, but to bring on the stage once more as far as possible the old procession of passions, sorrows and delights. The latest of us hopes he is not too late to taste for himself the high flavor of life which those before him talked so much about. If falling in love is a business incidental to adolescence, yet it is immensely hastened by our reading and by what we have heard; those whom the passion does not touch usually worry about their immunity instead of being thankful for it, and anything is better than never to have loved at all. It is not passion entirely that fills the hearts of the lovers brought at last to each other's arms; at least, the single thought with which the two hearts beat may be a triumphant "Now I know for myself." Similarly, however strange it may seem, we welcome sorrow and suffer-

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

ing, or we feel ourselves cheated rather than blest if none of it comes our way. Death, too, is less unwelcome than it might fairly be. At least those who faced it and have been reprieved, often remember that a satisfaction in knowing the worst took some of the terror away. There it was at last, the old shadow that waylays us all.

Desiring to discover for ourselves the well known and traditional experience, we desire at the same time a more excellent version of it than our predecessors have enjoyed. We would love as Romeo did, but we like to think that Romeo never loved so well, and ours is a more wonderful Juliet. Even our sorrows will be greater, if we have our way, for in the intensity with which we explore the old experiences we feel rightly that we ought to equal or surpass other men. We dread the operation for appendicitis, before we undergo it; then we reach the point of satisfaction

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

in finding out for ourselves what the operation is like; then finally we are persuaded that the operation was unusually severe, the worst of its kind. This is the artist in us, trying for distinction. And if with the old material of life we seek the distinction of excellence of statement, our motive is not simply a desire to surpass others, nor a desire to indicate progress, but often it is the hope to report the experience once for all. Art has always a dying part in it, as artists well know—some part which must constantly be restored by restatement. Try as he may to express only permanent things, the artist will include something that is aside from the main purpose, that goes out of date. Of course if an artist deliberately strives to be contemporary, and succeeds, his work to that extent will shortly become unintelligible; later poets will then try their hand at refurbishing or restoring the es-

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

stantial thing in the picture, and incidentally, without meaning to, they will include some contemporary and insignificant material of their own, which in time may precipitate another revision. What we call classics are the lucky masterpieces in which the permanent elements are so many and the transitory so few, that it seems useless and impertinent to revise them.

III

The desire for originality is not new, and explanations of it are old. Some of them are based on the supposed working of the artistic temperament. The artist, it is said, craves expression at all costs, and if the craving is not satisfied in one direction, it will reach in another. If we cannot pour all of our energy into our painting or our music, we may express the surplus in long hair and flowing cravat. This explanation, even if it were true, would imply that the artist desires notoriety rather than expression, for you cannot express yourself unless you speak a language your audience already knows, but eccentricity, which is the extreme form of originality, will attract attention even if

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

it is not understood. But artists are not likely to admit that this theory does justice to their temperament. They will remark that few of the greatest masters have been eccentric in their appearance, none of them in their subject-matter. Like other men they fitted the society in which their lot fell, except that they had a genius for feeling life more vitally than other men. So many of them, like Chaucer or Shakespeare or Scott, cultivated the art of living close to their fellows and sharing an average fate, that we half suspect the less gifted would do the same if they could; for the artist who is original in dress or manners is not likely to meet human nature in its normal state—rather, his neighbors will whisper when he appears, and nudge each other, and he will never see what manners they use toward those who are not queer. Poets with an original or eccentric subject-matter meet the same

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

fate. Could Poe or Baudelaire learn anything about us if they came among us with a reputation for the abnormal? Would we not unconsciously close to them our usual impulses, in our curiosity to observe their strangeness? To the artist who loves life in the sane way of a Chaucer, a Montaigne, a Molière, such a welcome would be calamitous; rather hide anything that distinguishes him from others, even the fact that he can write, if by this caution he may draw closer to his sensitive race, and observe the undisturbed mystery and beauty of natural life.

Indeed, the whole question of originality, this desire for novelty, is in the end a question of our love of life. In the moments when we love life passionately we are not likely to get too much of it, and we do not ask to exchange it for another kind. When art and politics were creative, in the heyday of writers, painters, architects

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

and statesmen who later seem to us almost solitary in their excellence, there was still no taking thought to be original; they fell in love, rather, with the obvious. Columbus made no voyage in search of originality—simply there had been too many hints and rumors for him to stay at home any longer. Some very original spirits, we may suppose, took no stock in his expedition. For Shakespeare or Molière play-writing was an obvious task, and an old one; they may have expected to do successfully what others had only tried, but except for the success they aimed at nothing new. Where great poets have spoken on the matter themselves, their point of view is quite clear. At the end of the *Vita Nuova* Dante announced his hope to write of Beatrice such things as had never been written of any woman. Not to write a new kind of book, for women had been praised before, as he implied, and there

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

had been poems of vision and pilgrimages through hell; but his hope was to excel. He determined to speak no more of his blessed lady until he could praise her worthily, and to praise such a woman worthily would be to write such things as had been written of no other. In the same mood Milton promised his great epic—in passionate love of the best before him, and in the assurance of doing as well or better—"I began thus to assent both to them and divers of my friends here at home, and not less to an inward prompting, which now grew daily upon me, that by labour and intense study, which I take to be my portion in this life, joined with the strong propensity of nature, I might leave something so written to after-times as they should not willingly let it die." This is the great manner of the poets. But in the opening words of Rousseau's *Confessions*, to take an opposite example, we

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

have the accent of the modern disease; he would undertake, he said, an enterprise of which there had never been a parallel, and of which there would be no imitation—he would tell the truth about one man, about himself. He promised no excellence except the uniqueness of the subject, for truth-telling, though always desirable, can hardly be important unless the subject is worth while.

Rousseau's book is great in spite of its introductory sentence; his subject after all was not unique, for each of us can follow his example and write at least one book about ourselves; and perhaps he told less of the unvarnished truth than he intended, for being an artist in every fiber of his body, he selected from his experience not his most singular adventures, but his adventures in those realms of experience—in sex, for example—which his readers were surest to understand and find

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

interesting. But with his famous announcement, whether or not he followed it, our malady began. Hence all the poems and novels of autobiography, all the diaries of young men and maidens, old men and children, all the bouquets of verse still showered upon us in which the poet confides his intimate symptoms. In all this there is little to remind us of great art, or of the times in which great art has been made; the resemblance is rather to a hospital or an old folks' home, where the inmates find importance in the fact that they have been there longer than their fellows, or are younger, or a little less blind and deaf. Hence also our difficulty in understanding earlier literature, of a date when not originality but excellence was the aim. When we first read Shakespeare's sonnets or Sidney's, we conclude with satisfaction that the poet was writing out of his heart, in the Rousseau fashion. But when we

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

learn that these stories are works of art, dramatic renderings of life, and that the "I" who speaks in the lines is first of all the hero of the story, whether or not he is the poet too; and when we learn further that much of the material is adapted from earlier poets, used over again as we use old words to make up new sentences—then perhaps our respect for the master vanishes, our ideal is cracked; they were not such original poets after all. It is the defect of our taste. We forget that the oldest phrases, if they have the poetic excellence of being true to all of us, are renewed and become personal in the adventure of each individual. Though Job ought to get the credit, by all modern standards, of uttering that very original profession of faith, "I know that my redeemer liveth", yet the words were too full of possible meanings to remain linked with Job's private misfortunes; being already

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

immortal, they seem never to have been said for a first time. Lover after lover has found in his own passion the meaning of some old song, perhaps "My love is like the red, red rose", which until the passion fell on him seemed sentimental and silly. And Rousseau himself in the *Confessions*, at the very outset of his egotism, of his originality, of his indecorous opposing of the individual to the race, records his boyhood love of an old folk-song—precisely the kind of art from which his doctrine led us away.

But nowadays the desire for originality comes not only from the writer; a certain class of readers also demand it, the kind of person who reads with an eye out for imitations and plagiarisms. That plot has been used before, he says, when two men are in love with the same woman—or, that character is copied from so-and-so, when Pierrot's father forgives the returning

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

prodigal. There are reviewers of this type also, who read their victims into categories, calling this poet Tennysonian, that novelist Meredithian, that essayist Emersonian. Such categories become less definite as we read back into the past, for over the range of a few centuries no plot is new, nor does any writer seem altogether unlike the others. There is such a thing as plagiarism, yet unless one is a fanatic for originality, the question of plagiarism is of no great importance; the world is not interested, and if the author is concerned from whom the play or the plot is stolen, his concern is more for his property than for his art. If his work is stolen unchanged, it is still as good art as it was before; if the thief has mangled it, his plagiarized version will not be so good as the authentic text; but if by luck he has improved on what he took, it becomes his, bag and baggage, so far as fame is concerned. Who

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

were the authors of those songs Burns made over into his masterpieces? Who were those dramatists and chroniclers whom Shakespeare rewrote? The names in many cases can be looked up, but they are of no account. The world feels that the great writer conferred a benefit by improving on the earlier work. What is far more important, the world also feels that the great writer, in improving on another man's work, actually invaded no private rights, for the material of literature is life, and life is no one's private property. After the invention of printing, writers saw the possibility of financial dividends from their works, and plagiarism is an aspect of this financial question, but it has otherwise nothing to do with art. The world in general continues to think of art in the old way, as creation rather than as business, and it quite properly cares little who does the creating, or who afterward

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

receives a money reward. What were Homer's annual earnings? Or was it really Homer? Or who besides David wrote his psalms? We know instinctively that these questions are trivial.

But imitation in art is often more apparent than real. If a poet is in touch with his age, he will write of the subjects that interest him, and other poets in touch with the age will also write about what interests them, and consequently they may all write of much the same thing; they are not imitating each other, but they are enjoying a common pleasure, to which one of them may have shown the way. We often say that the popular writer is trying to catch the favor of the public by giving it what it likes, and in some instances he may be calculating and his motives unworthy. But it is more probable that being typical of his age, he simply likes the same things as his fel-

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

lows. The Elizabethan Londoner liked historical plays; did Shakespeare write them only to please his audience, or rather did he not share the general taste? The principle here implied will explain why any poets who have an enormous popularity will have also an enormous so-called influence. They are popular because they share the people's taste, and the people therefore find in their work what they like; but if their subject-matter is so popular, many others will be writing of it too. The resulting resemblance is not really an influence, or rarely is; it is a contemporary tendency. The poet who is best in the lot will be remembered. All ran, but one receives the prize. However, those who came in second and third are neither imitators nor plagiarists.

IV

To submit oneself to the impersonal discipline of art is hard for the young. Few young writers are lured into the profession by the impossibility of being original in their craft, or by the excellent chance their best works have of becoming anonymous with time. We can imagine them pleading for the rights of their personalities; what on earth did the old pagan mean by his proud *non omnis moriar*, if his personality was not to survive in his work? For their comfort let us add that personality in art is indestructible. If we have any of it, it will live. And if we mean personality when we say originality, thinking of the author rather than of his subject, then we may add also that genuine

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

personality is original in spite of itself. How hard it is to tell a story twice the same way; how difficult to form anything permanent, even habits; how impossible to get once for all into a rut. A dull lecture, though we hear it a second time word for word, is subtly changed, for we no longer hear it the first time, and "afflictions induce callosities", as Sir Thomas Browne said, and "sorrows destroy us or themselves." The record we buy for our phonograph, though we liked it at first, may empty itself with each repetition, till the charm is gone; even the photograph of our dear ones, framed on the wall, has a tendency at last to merge itself in the wall paper. Whatever is repeated in our consciousness becomes mechanical and unnoticed, or the edge of it is blunted. To restore the sharp edges of impression, to bring back the first flavor of things, is the ideal of life and of art; only strong per-

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

sonality can do it, but where such a personality comes, it is irresistible and undisguisable. It shows up best in those attitudes of life which in other hands have grown drab and sordid; the contrast brings out the genius. This kind of success in life is the art of the actor who plays a long run, and who gives even in the one hundredth performance the impression of a fresh experience. A poorer actor would have needed a new play long before. Or we might say that art is a summary of life—and where will personality show itself sooner than in summarizing? When Lafcadio Hearn lectured to his Japanese students, he followed the reading of each English poem by a brief paraphrase in prose, which usually is the most precious part of his criticism; for in the retelling, his personality emphasized what he liked in the verses. If we could ask Tennyson, Morris, Browning,

ORIGINALITY IN LITERATURE

Arnold and Meredith each to write out a summary of something we all know, we should have five criticisms, and five revelations of personality. And there are more personalities in the world than we may realize; only they waste themselves in the search for the original, when all that is needed is to be sincere.

**THE
CULT OF THE NATURAL**

III

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

I

IT belongs with the confusion of esthetics in our time that the same people who ask art to be original often ask it to be natural. Being natural would appear at first sight the least original of programmes. Even if by originality we mean personality, yet there still seems some contradiction in the wish at one and the same time to develop a strong personality and to remain in a state of nature. Since it is the thoroughbred, not the wild animal, that is distinguished from his fellows, and the cultivated bloom, not the field flower, that charms by its single self rather

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

than in quantity, a condition of impulse close to the unsifted accidents of life would seem to promise an art notable chiefly for its volume, its indistinction and its insignificance. But those who ask art to be natural never mean completely natural. In their wiser moments they are only asking art not to be artificial, or at least to help them forget it is artificial. They demand a "realistic and romantic naturalism", or "a world of honest, and often harsh reality", and what they are looking for is indicated by the fact that they find something convincingly lifelike in a drama of low life or an American vulgarization of a French farce, but something strained and mechanical in a comedy by Sheridan or Oscar Wilde. Art, no doubt, is still desirable in literature—art shot through with crude material, to reassure us that we are human. Since all plays are highly artificial, naturalness is hardly

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

the word for the virtue of good plays; they are convincing, rather, they take us frankly into another world, and for the moment make us forget it is not our world of everyday. Yet those who ask the stage to be natural are apparently reassured when through the imaginary world of art breaks some accent of ordinary speech, some aspect of our common sordidness. Here, it seems, we touch earth and are strengthened.

The cult of the natural at its best asks of the medium of art also, as well as of the subject, that it wear a common aspect, untouched by artifice. Many of the new poets take as their ideal "the sequence of the spoken phrase", with a special dislike of all "inversions"; the "language of common speech" will serve their purposes. Yet most of them are better poets than their theories would indicate, and their practise, like Wordsworth's in a similar

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

predicament, is perhaps sufficient guide to the kind of naturalness they are after. *An Extempore Effusion upon the Death of James Hogg* is the kind of naturalness Wordsworth fell into when he was off his guard. "Other poets", says a more modern cultivator of naturalism, "will come and perchance perfect where these men have given the tools. Other writers, forgetting the stormy times in which this movement had its birth, will inherit in plenitude and calm that for which they have fought." Most of us who are convinced that all speech is artful in so far as it is intelligible, can occasionally put up with a bit of fine writing like this, but we note in passing that "perchance" and "plenitude" are not the language of common speech today. As for the fear of inversions and the sacredness of the natural word-order, it is enough for the moment to observe that no one order is natural for

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

all peoples, nor for any one speech at all times; different word-orders express different states of emotion, even different ideas, and one is as natural as the other. "Tell me not in mournful numbers" or "Tell not me in mournful numbers"—which is the natural order? From another and contemporary New England poet, who sticks valiantly for the natural sequence of speech, we may examine a characteristic line, which has as high a percentage of nature in it as absence of art can insure—"I must pass that door to go to bed." Would it be less natural to say, "To go to bed, I must pass that door"?

To practise artifice and yet to seem spontaneous, to be natural and yet to achieve art—these ancient paradoxes against which the cultivators of the natural arrive, in both the subject-matter and the medium of literature, need to be examined in greater detail, but it is well to

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

observe them first in a general way, in order to mark how much confusion lies on the very surface of such thinking. It is emotion perhaps rather than thinking; it is a protest in another form against what seems old and inherited; it is an impatience with art itself. Yet art exerts its old charm upon us all, and the worshipper of the natural succumbs unawares to every triumph over nature. In American letters we fix on Abraham Lincoln as our type of natural expression; the legend of his humble beginnings and the plainness of his manner deceive us into a conviction that he was less indebted to art than Thomas Jefferson, and we therefore talk of the rhetorical extravagances of the Declaration and contrast them with the Attic simplicities of the Gettysburg Address. Perhaps we see a final proof of our sound taste in the story that Matthew Arnold

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

gave up the Address for lost when he got to the colloquial "proposition"; "dedicated to the proposition", we say, was more than his artificial spirit could bear. Whether Arnold expressed such an opinion, or whether he would have been right in so doing, is of less consequence than our emotional readiness, if we cultivate the natural, to accept the Lincoln speech as an illustration of our ideal, and to set it over against the artifice of Jefferson's great document—to detect a literary manner in such a phrase as "When in the course of human events", and nothing but naturalness in "Fourscore and seven years ago"—or to find an empty and sounding rhetoric in "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness", but only the democratic syllables of common sense in "government of the people, by the people, for the people." Both documents are as rich as they can

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

well be in rhetoric, as all great oratory is, and of the two, Lincoln's as a matter of fact is rather more artful in the progress of its ideas.

II

Our confusion in the search for the natural in art springs from the many different meanings that attach to both words, art and nature. For most of us, perhaps, art is a decoration, something supplementary to life; in the spirit of this definition we understand what it is to cultivate the arts—to buy pictures when our means will permit us that addition to more primary interests, or to attend the opera after the preliminary stages of our social pilgrimage. We use the word art so often in this bad sense, with the implication of insincerity, that there is something bracing in any invitation to return to nature and to be once more what we were while we still

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

were honest with ourselves and had a sense of humor.

This nature that we return to, haunts our thoughts as a fixed state in which the wise soul can find enduring refuge. Just how we get the idea that nature is stable, is not easy to see; the notion often exists in our minds side by side with a deep conviction that life is a flux, and that time and space are but relative terms in the universal stream. But perhaps it is the outer appearance of the world, nature as landscape, that first suggests a refuge even against time, mountains are so immovable in their mysterious silence for us as for Wordsworth, the ocean is so untamable for us, as it was for Byron. Perhaps also the contemplation of the changing universe during the past century of daring and imaginative science has endowed nature with a romantic career of its own, such as the old humanists ascribed only to men;

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

perhaps the progress of stars, planets and solar systems, observed or guessed at, suggests in spite of the evolution it illustrates a deeper kind of rest in the laws by which that evolution conducts itself; so that the last result of turning from human art to watch the behavior of inanimate things is the conviction that nothing is really inanimate, but that all move in the wisdom of an art superhuman, in an order peaceful and eternal as only a divine vitality could conceive. When we think of nature in this sense of the word, leaving man out of the picture, ourselves too as far as possible who do the thinking, we are ready to say with Emerson that art is an impertinent intrusion, nature is all. "Nature in the common sense refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf; art is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture; but his

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

operations taken together are so insignificant,—a little shaping, baking, patching and washing,—that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind they do not vary the result.”

We can speak of nature in this all-embracing way so long as, like Emerson for the moment, we lay aside every thought of man and of the moral world which he creates or brings under his control, and in which his responsibility is fixed. But once we resume that human outlook, we begin to use the word natural in at least two other senses. In the first place we use it to describe the process of life, that constant birth or becoming which seems to have been present to the mind of the Greek also when he used his word for nature—as when Aristotle says, in a famous phrase, that art is an imitation of nature, meaning that the process of art is a copy of the processes of birth and becoming, and cre-

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

ates by the same methods that life does. In this sense of the word nature is like art, not opposed to it, and with this interpretation Polixenes tried to rebuke the cult of the natural in Perdita, who would not have in her garden a flower artificially bred:

Yet nature is made better by no mean,
But nature makes that mean: so, o'er that art
Which you say adds to nature, is an art
That nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we
 marry
A gentler scion to the wildest stock,
And make conceive a bark of baser kind
By bud of nobler race: this is an art
Which does mend nature—change it rather:
 but
The art itself is nature.

We use the word nature also to describe the raw material of life which is the result of a previous birth or becoming. It is what some earlier art, human or divine,

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

has already worked on, and what we must work on now if art is to continue. Nature in this sense is the marble, the color, the language which are to be the mediums of various arts; human passions and instincts also, the social and the material environments which attend our lives, the accidents of fortune which make up their plots; and since all this is what art must work upon, nature so defined is forever somewhat opposed to art, as inanimate materials are opposed to the workman, as the wood and the chisel are opposed to the carpenter. For art is the use of the materials of life for human benefit, a method employed for a premeditated end in a world which except for art might seem given over to chance. Because it is a rearrangement and a control of nature to effect the will of man, life itself, so far as it becomes civilized, becomes an art. But in a world as old as ours the raw material

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

with which art deals is itself the result of art; the wood has been already shaped into boards, the chisel and the hammer have been made into tools before the carpenter touches them, and the environment in which the carpenter is born, the instincts and passions he inherits, the turns and coincidences of his fate, are all probably the result of what others before him made of their materials and opportunities. Thinking of life so, we see it as an alternation of nature and art, or as an alternation in which what first is art becomes afterwards nature, all the achievement of one generation turning into mere starting point and opportunity for the next; and thinking of life so, we understand how nature, to the true artist, is forever set over against art in a contrast that implies affection rather than antagonism, for those who instead of defining art as a decorative supplement to life identify it with civiliza-

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

tion itself, are free to love nature without abandoning an ideal, as a sculptor is free to love fine marble, or the painter to love his medium of tint and tone. With time and by such a process of reworking, nature draws nearer and nearer to art; the raw material is made constantly more orderly by rearrangement, as a field is enriched by plowing in the crops. Even in the sphere of human character this is true, in the very seat of the natural, in our instincts and passions; for though we may agree that character should be measured by a moral career rather than by impulses wholly innate, yet it is well to reflect that your impulses and sentiments, if you are born and brought up in Florence or Chartres, Heidelberg or Seville, are likely to be different from the impulses and sentiments natural to a child born or brought up in The Bronx or in Hoboken. In the eyes of the naturalist, nature is all, as

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

Emerson said, and art only a little shaping, baking, patching and washing, but to the artist who carries in his imagination something of the scope of agelong growth and creation, the truth is what Nature said to the poet in Voltaire's dialogue—"They call me nature, but by this time I am become all art."

III

The possibility, then, of returning to nature disappears when we realize how long a road we have traveled; all that the most primitive minded of us can do is to stick close to the raw material of his own life, to the circumstances with which the art of his predecessors surrounded him. This is the nature which the realists cultivate today. They report those facts of life from which art might take its beginning, but they report them as much as possible in an arrested state, for fear they might pass on into art. Among the poets one, catching the accent of the spoken language, gives us the language of one phase of New England; another, with a like faithfulness to the natural cadence, gives us another kind of New England speech;

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

a third has the colloquialism of Illinois. They are all artists, or they would not mean much to us, but in so far as they have followed their own ideals of the natural they have laid aside some of the magician's robes to which by inheritance they are entitled, and they leave with us their renderings of our world in a form of utterance less noble than their theme and out of harmony with it. In our prose and verse alike, the studied inadequacy of style to the occasion is a standing reproach to us, all the worse since it is often the pose of an inverted vanity, like the democratic conviction still flourishing in the land that the dinner coat or the evening coat is an artifice of a worn-out society, whereas the senatorial frock coat and wide hat are natural and God-given sheathings of our original nakedness.

To revert to the starting point of our lives is to seek nature in vain, since the

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

alternations of art and nature proceed relentlessly, whether we rest our dead weight on the process or try to help it along. It is a vain flattery of our reluctance to travel, to take our seat always in the last car. But, however futile, the cult of the natural in literature has a reasonable explanation, and it is well to understand with sympathy why it is likely to recur periodically in a civilization that must feel its age more and more. Art criticizes life, as we have often been told, by selecting or sifting it; that is what the word criticism means. The authority that art has over us, its right to make such a sifting, derives not from books but from the human brain itself, from the method of memory; we remember only by forgetting most of the things we have done or have suffered, and rearranging the rest. As we grow older life becomes clearer, we say, thanks to this selection and forgetting.

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

When art sifts life, then, it is only imitating the process of nature, and when we observe the process we can understand why the Greeks said that memory was the mother of the muses. But this sifting of life on the part of memory and of art is progressive, and in all honesty we may wonder at times whether it has not gone too far. Some of the clarity of vision, the firmness of doctrine, which is the reward of old age, may be not the genuine harvesting of experience which is almost the gift of prophecy; it may be rather a partial memory which seems clear because so much has been left out. If a poet could get a first-hand impression of life, his art would be one sifting of nature; if he reacts not only to nature but to the interpretations of other poets, his art is a second sifting, more highly organized, perhaps, more intelligible, than is normally recorded from immediate contact with life. It

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

makes no difference whether we call these siftings poetry or criticism, since poetry, as Arnold reminded us, is a criticism of life. The poet may submit his sensitiveness to nature as sifted through three or four or any number of interventions of personality, and we may call the result poetry, or criticism, or criticism of criticism; very often we cannot tell, and the poet does not know, whether the life that stimulates him is direct or transmitted. But in each remove from the first contact with nature, in each additional intervention of personality, we get a clearer order and a finer intelligibility—truth instead of facts, formulas instead of experiences, and fewer exceptions. The literature, then, which begins in naturalism will at last emerge in philosophy, if we allow it time enough, and the biography of an individual will be condensed and generalized into a proverb.

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

There are two good reasons, however, for suspecting this economical result. One is that the proverb is probably not true. To arrive at it, in each successive sifting we have left out something, and the total of all the omissions has become almost as comprehensive as the original experience. We must go back and gather up the discarded fragments of our adventure, in order to qualify properly our too simple and absolute summary of life. The art of the historian, we often fear, progresses by some such over-elimination; archæology sometimes rescues him by restoring large sections of a past, the absence of which he had not noticed, but in periods too recent for archæology to take him by surprise, he constantly rewrites his history, to sift it more to his mind, until we may suspect that his account is nearer to our philosophy than to the original facts. In history this tendency is hardly a matter of concern, for

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

if we have a criticism of the eighteenth century which satisfies us, we are content, and the eighteenth century, being dead and gone, will not mind; the poet, therefore, can look on with equanimity while the historians propose to rewrite our national life in order to bring it more in harmony with our present sentiments toward this or that other country; the poet knows that history is not a science but one of the most fascinating of the arts, closely allied to eloquence in its mission to teach and persuade, and that having to do strictly with the past it enjoys rare freedom in sifting its facts. But the poet himself enjoys no such freedom. Whatever he writes will be checked up by the life we now live; his readers will look into their hearts and criticize. If therefore he has gained his clarity by leaving out things essential in our experience, we reject him as too far from our reality to be of consequence to

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

the race. He may be a philosopher; he is no poet.

His philosophy may even be true, and yet his right to the laurel may be justly denied. For the special service of art is to make us live more intensely in the very life which art sifts and selects—in fact, the sifting has for its conscious purpose a more vivid realization of what we live through, and a novel or a play is successful, from the standpoint of imaginative literature, only in the degree to which we enter the work, become ourselves the hero, fall in love with the heroine, hate the villain. In this sense the dime novel and the melodrama, though carelessly branded by the theorist as bad art, are likely to be very good art indeed, and the over-reasoned story, though adorned with subtle reflection and refinements of diction, is in fact poor art, as the average person in his heart knows, for in such books the reflec-

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

tion upon life is paid for by a failure to represent what the reflection is about. If the author would only share with us the adventures that caused him to reflect, we could do our own reflecting upon them, but if he will not share the secret which inspires him, we do not care much what philosophizing he does. Literature continues to be great so long as the sifting it makes it really a selection only from life, and what remains is for the imagination still a first-hand experience; when the residue grows thin to the imagination and addresses itself rather to logic, we feel justified in making whatever return we can to our starting point in nature, to reassure ourselves there, if we cannot in the book, that this human life we love is still with us.

IV

If such a taking to cover is observed in much writing today, the writers who in one form or another now cultivate nature rather than art may plead with justice that the best literature our country produced before them was perilously deficient in a sense of reality. If they do so plead, however, they ought to be consistent. If they think that so great an artist as Hawthorne was deficient in reality, that transcendental philosophy occupies too much room in his romances and the sense of actual American life too little, then they ought not to tell us at the same time that Poe and Whitman are our great poets, for those two were even further along toward

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

the abstract than Hawthorne. And there will be an increasing obligation on those who in each generation of the fast-ripening world make a return to nature, to provide some demonstration that it is not life after all they are running away from. Some men have taken to the hermit's cell to find God; others to avoid responsibility. As civilization becomes greater in quantity, with more discoveries of science, with more apparatus of education, we need more and more the poetic genius that will dedicate this material to great ends, and by articulating for us what we can recognize as our best ideal, teach us to simplify life by casting off the other less significant interests. The solution of all this raw material for art can only be a greater art. When we turn back from this heroic opportunity to take refuge in what is for us nature, we must convince ourselves, if we can that our retreat does not indicate

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

in us inadequate equipment or weak nerve or small heart.

In our present cult of the natural there is cause to suspect some such lack of skill and courage. The plea that our predecessors were so deficient in reality that we, to save the day, must exhibit less art than theirs, will not go in the long run. Our new poetry is curiously relaxed and enervated in temper, ground-hugging, grey and flat; if we have moods which such writing adequately represents, we have other moments more cheerful and creative, which our architecture and our engineering manage to express, but which cannot be guessed at in our poetry, not as much as the oak can be guessed at in the acorn. Our novels, too, have lost their courage, and though they often represent photographically the machine of civilization which builds up around us, and which now is the raw material on which our art is to

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

operate, they do not even attempt to portray the spirit of the artist which actually pervades the land, the joy in putting the machine to human uses, the almost divine ecstasy in having made so much of nature subject already to the mind. This mood of confidence in art is as much a fact in our national life as the number of gallons that flow over Niagara each hour, but the poets and novelists seem to have taken fright.

In both verse and prose, in style as well as subject, the cult of the natural has limited our writers to a few individualistic attitudes, and has taken from them the power to speak with authority on all subjects for us all. We have no American poet, no American novelist; each is the poet or novelist of Vermont or Boston or Maine or Chicago—whatever scene is to him by birth or habit his natural world. To find a universal utterance of universal

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

experience is the aim and the tendency of art, but the cult of nature compels us to return each in what state he came. The counsel to use the language of ordinary speech limits us to the speech of some locality; and such limitation is a fatal handicap for great poetry. The advice to use only the natural word-order limits us to the word-order which each of us finds natural, whereas it is our duty, on the contrary, if we make any claim to mastery in literature, to enlarge our vocabulary even beyond the words our family and our neighbors made natural to us, and to cultivate all the variety of word-order our speech permits, that we may enrich and refine our style, and render our meaning more precise. The temptation to get along with a small vocabulary and a meagre change of construction is altogether too natural; we did not need this premeditated urging to a still greater poverty. Hith-

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

erto the best remedy for a narrow equipment in language has been to read constantly in the great writers; it was they who extended the powers of speech and laid upon each tongue the shape and cadence which to the ill-informed might seem the gift of nature. But now that the ideal of the writer is to shrink to the measure of the conversation he is used to, how shall our nobler moments find expression? Not even in reading old authors, for by the contemporary doctrine of naturalness the old masters are artificial. "Whither thou goest, I will go, and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried." . . . "At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down; at her feet he bowed, he fell; where he bowed there he fell down dead." . . . "Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it."

These cadences are not natural, and they are not modeled on the sounds that habitually fill our ears. Their distinction, or if you like, their condemnation, is that they are works of art. Such language gets away as far as it can from time and place, and by much sifting out from unessentials it tries to preserve a universal appeal. If you can write this way at all, you can write as well in New York as in London, as well now as in 1611.

The purpose of art is to make its subject-matter also universal, to sift and rearrange the raw material of life into a history that will have as much meaning as possible for as many readers as possible, for as long as possible. But the cult of the natural tends to the opposite effect—to

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

make the subject-matter of literature temporary in its interest and limited in its meaning. The Broadway entertainments which please us for the moment, since they conform to our taste in the spontaneous, the impromptu and the natural, are but the raw material of drama; good plays might be made out of them; but in each case the author stops the story before we pass from nature to art. It is natural, in the sense of our definition, that a stoker in modern times should have two ideas—that to the idle and effete he may seem akin to the missing link, and that since he is at the bottom of society, he must be supporting it. Quite a philosophy can be made out of two ideas, and these two, when put together, as in a recent drama, promise an explosion. But after all, nothing explodes. The man simply enunciates his two ideas in different accents of violence, until the author thinks it is time

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

to stop, and gets him strangled in the zoo. An artist would have been interested to see in action a character with such a philosophy. We have recently seen another play with an idea, a very simple one; by any means in her power a girl is going to capture the man she loves. Since the only means in her power are eccentric ones, we watch her eccentricity with astonishment for three acts; her behavior is original, like nothing that ever was or will be, and our interest is held by the growing desperation of her ingenuity. Well, she gets him—for much the same reason that the philosophic stoker was strangled, because it is time for the audience to go home. An artist would have granted her ambition as natural, and her success as natural too; he would have shown us, however, what happened after her success, when her philosophy of opportunism in etiquette would have met its

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

test. Had *Much Ado About Nothing* been written by the author of either of the plays just described, the famous comedy would never have got further than the raw material of the story, the legend that Benedick and Beatrice waged a merry war between them; we should have had an evening's entertainment of jokes and insults, made gradually more intensive, more violent and more surprising in order to hold us till the last curtain. Shakespeare, choosing the way of art, begins rather at the point where the wit of Beatrice and Benedick is exhausted; they have the reputation for it, but their public efforts show signs of strain and flagging. From this start in nature the play proceeds to represent what happened to Benedick and Beatrice, the witty enemies, when serious accidents brought their fates together.

V

Nowhere in literature, perhaps, is art so obviously essential and naturalism so obviously fatal as in drama, for drama, by exhibiting life to us directly, quickens to its utmost whatever desire we have to see our fellows move on from their natural beginnings to some achievement or significant conclusion. Impulses, ideas, motives, prejudices, passions, and as we now say, complexes, are all natural forms of energy; in real life they weary us if they have only a lyric expression, and we wish they would get started into action. Their attempts toward action may be thwarted, and such a defeat may be tragically significant, but at least they should try, and if instead of trying they waste

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

themselves in talk, they become not energies but nuisances. It is for this reason, we suppose, that Aristotle long ago cautioned us that tragedy, or all drama, is an imitation not of men but of an action, and that plot is the essential thing. He might have said that character may exist in a state of nature, but plot presupposes art in life, a selection from all other incidents of one succession of events which so selected have a meaning. What he did say was that without action there can be no drama, but there may be without character. Plot is a generalization of life, in which the actors may or may not be portrayed as individuals. The woman who lost the piece of silver, the good Samaritan, the mother of Œdipus, are clear enough in their universal relation to the story in which they appear; their personalities may be restated to suit our taste, or left undefined. We read in the news-

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

paper that a man jumps into the river to save a drowning child, and having got to land, discovers that he has rescued his own son. We live in that drama without asking what was the character of the father or what was the psychology of the son.

It is remarkable how Shakespeare illustrates Aristotle's doctrine, by showing his characters in action and by avoiding as far as possible an analysis of their motives, their instincts, their prejudices, their passions. Life with him finds expression in art or not at all. It is a mirror indeed which he applies to nature, not a microscope; in his glass we see the form of virtue and the features of vice, we know who are good and who are bad, at least as accurately as we form such judgments in life, but we do not know the motives of the good or the bad. What were Falstaff's motives? Should he be

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

acted as a comic or a tragic character? Why did Portia like Bassanio? Why did Cordelia take such an absolute stand with her father? What did Hero think of Claudio, or Hermione of Leontes, after the restoration to the jealous husband? Was Hamlet's mother an accessory to the murder of his father, or did her conscience trouble her only because she had made a second marriage and in such haste? The profundity of Shakespeare's art lies in his genius for representing the surface of action; in art as in ethics, life is chiefly conduct, and it is enough that behind conduct lies unprobed the same mystery that lies behind existence itself.

But since naturalism thinks otherwise, Shakespeare is no longer our example. Browning is more in our vein. For him the natural man, the raw material of each one of us, the hidden instincts and impulses, must be the whole subject, and

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

action he finds useful only in the fragmentary incidents that must be premised before you can conclude anything even about instincts. Few verdicts in criticism are wider of the mark than the too familiar saying that Browning's genius is Shakespearean. He is the opposite of Shakespeare. He is absorbed in what we call in a loose way psychology, in the original man apart from his conduct, or as far apart from it as you can separate him. To be so concerned about motives and instincts is to be a kind of inverted dramatist, moving back from action instead of toward it; it is no wonder, therefore, that Browning's so-called dramas fail on the stage, since in that direct relation to the audience their static naturalness, their inability to live out a significance in conduct, is pitilessly revealed. Everybody examines himself and talks about himself, as God made him; nothing

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

gets under way; the audience is finally delivered by the death of the soliloquizer, not in a zoo, but more politely, it may be, in a gondola. "Even if you string together a set of speeches expressive of character," said Aristotle, "though well finished in diction and in thought, yet you will not produce the essential tragic effect nearly so well as with a play which, however deficient in these respects, yet has a plot and artistically constructed incidents." To return to nature absolutely would be to return to silence. Short of silence, to return to nature in literature is to confess your private character in monologue. Browning is master in that kind. It would be untactful to name the writers today who share the mastery with him, and perhaps it is enough merely to suggest the idea. To save time we might prudently meditate rather upon the few

THE CULT OF THE NATURAL

poets and novelists remaining whose art gets further than monologue.

Meanwhile the universe marches on its secret errand, not altogether secret since it marches, and its art is slowly dramatized in its vast conduct. Art for art's sake is a formula inspiring if taken in a noble sense, but in any sense it is intelligible as a programme deliberately chosen. To cultivate nature for nature's sake is absurd. For nature is here without our aid, and to preserve it in what we call its pure state, we need cultivate nothing—unless it be a more animal contentedness to profit in indolence by the art of those who came before us.

**THE CULT OF THE
CONTEMPORARY**

IV

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

I

THE end of playing", said Hamlet, "both at the first and now, was and is, to show the very age and body of the time, his form and presence." It would seem that Hamlet thought the business of art was to portray the age in which the artist lived, not only to address his contemporaries, but to speak to them about themselves. The cult of the contemporary, then, in our own day could ask for no better text than this phrase of the Prince of Denmark; what a pity he uttered it so long ago!

Shakespeare did not agree with Hamlet

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

—at least, he made some pretence to show his Elizabethan audience the form and presence of remote times and far-away countries, Rome and Athens, Denmark itself, Italy, Scotland, Bohemia, the age of King John and the Richards and the Henrys, the time and place, whatever they were, of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the *Tempest*, *Cymbeline*, the *Winter's Tale*. And Hamlet himself, be it noted, is hardly faithful to his theory, for when he asks the players to repeat a favorite speech of his, it turns out to be Æneas's tale to Dido. It was from a piece, he said, that pleased not the million, perhaps never had a second performance, but in the judgment of the competent and in his own opinion it was an excellent play. Perhaps the million were at the moment bred exclusively to appreciate contemporary themes; costume plays were not the fashion. Hamlet's other choice in drama is

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

poor evidence of his esthetic theory; the murder of Gonzaga seems to have been already ancient history, but he chose it to catch the conscience of the king, since the story fitted his own household tragedy. Shall we follow the hint, and suggest that Hamlet, like Shakespeare, really had nothing in common with those who would make contemporary life the proper subject for art? Perhaps he would not have mentioned the age and body of the time, if he had not just said that the end of playing is to show scorn her own image, if indeed the purpose of his meddling with the drama at all, at that moment, had not been to sting the royal murderer into a confession of his guilt.

The cult of the contemporary follows logically from the cult of the natural. If we are to write of a life untouched with art, we can write only of life about us, as our fathers left it to us—our best of na-

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

ture, the talent buried in a napkin; and if we are to use the ordinary language of men, we must use today's language, the only speech that to us is ordinary. And if it is possible to understand the search for the natural as an effort to correct the generalizing tendency in literature, we may also find a sympathetic explanation of the insistence on the contemporary, when we recall how many writers have reasoned themselves into a determination to walk in the ways of their heart and in the sight of their eyes. Did not Homer celebrate the glory of Hellenism? Did not Virgil celebrate the empire of Rome? Well, then, we ought to celebrate the United States, our United States, rather than the country of Washington or Jefferson; we ought to celebrate the hour and the place we know, for we ought to love what we know—New York, Boston, Chicago or the Middle West. This con-

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

clusion seems rational, but the desired enthusiasm does not follow; the celebration of the contemporary in our literature is as dreary in its results as the worship of the natural, inspired merely by the sense of some duty rather than by delight in what is portrayed. Homer's zest for Hellenism is undeniable, and the instinct is right that we, too, must love life as he loved it before we can write as he wrote. For the moment we postpone the question, whether we must not also live a life as noble in kind as he portrayed. Virgil, writing in a more complicated, a sadder age, none the less loved imperial Rome, and we are right to think that before we shall be worthy to sing of our own land, in its own grave and complex era, we must take it to heart, problems and all. "The proof of a poet", said Whitman, "shall be sternly deferred till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he absorbed it." But Whitman's

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

own practise is a provoking comment on his saying; he succeeded remarkably in loving his land under an eternal form; the form and presence of his day he did not leave us. His poems are no guide-books to Manhattan and Long Island in 1855; even his beloved ferry-boats are dateless.

In what sense, then, would Whitman have us love our country, the home of our own times, and how did Homer and Virgil, as artists, love the Greece or the Rome they knew? To be of one's age, yet to be immortal, is a problem more subtle perhaps than to achieve an art that seems natural, but it can be solved in the same way, by defining the terms of our esthetic, and by referring them, as to a touchstone, to what we know of our common human nature. The question can also be narrowed at the start, and very profitably, by pressing home our reflections on Hamlet's remark to the players. There is one

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

kind of writing which does confine itself to the feature of virtue and the image of scorn, and which does indeed, for that very reason, limit itself always to giving the form and presence of the time—the kind of writing, that is, which indicts human nature instead of portraying it. Our better selves, our ideals, are of no time, but our faults are personal responsibilities and strictly contemporary. Satire, therefore, which holds up to merriment or to scorn what is ridiculous or base, must always take a present subject, and in general any art that leans toward the consideration of our shortcomings will lean also toward the life enacted at the moment. If Hamlet meant to trap the king, of course he would write into the old play the very murder the king had committed only three or four months ago; this would not be satire in the usual sense, but it would serve the same end, to convict the

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

guilty and to reform the world. The cult of the contemporary, then, is proper quite literally for satire; it remains only to ask how far it is proper for art.

But is satire not art? Did not Martial and Juvenal, Dryden and Pope write highly artistic satires? There is an art of satire, we must answer, as there is an art of preaching and an art of prosecuting a criminal case. But if there is a distinction between art and morals, then satire belongs to the world of ethics, and of ethics on the grim side, rather than to the world of beauty and delight. To survey and judge the morals of one's age is a serious office that no thoughtful and sensitive person seems altogether to neglect; if the purpose of art is to make such a survey, as Hamlet seems to say, then *Twelfth Night* is hardly a masterpiece in art, and *Sandford and Merton* is certainly one. If art, on the other hand, has for its pur-

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

pose to salvage out of our crude days the truth which can be translated into beauty, and which so translated may be a joy for ever, then art will have as little as possible to do with men's faults—what faults are joys for ever?—and the kind of writing which confines itself to our frailties or our sins will be as far removed as possible from art. Moreover, the moralist desires a cure of souls, and when the fault is remedied, who will care for the satire or even understand it? It is easy enough, without taking thought, to perish with our own time, but it is one of the oldest hopes art has held out to natural man, that being purified into art he should not altogether die. But mortality is germane to satire. When we read Dryden's terrible excoriations of Og and Doeg, we can only wonder who were the human beings he hated so, and when we come to know something of their lives and characters, we are more con-

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

fused to name the moral impulse in him which made it necessary to fix them in so warm a hell. In art, loving your own times does not mean loving to find fault with them.

II

A genuine love of your own time is the recognition, in what you meet in it, of those best moments which crave to be made accessible even for the remotest of ages following. To immortalize any given moment, however, is to take it out of the temporary and somehow to find a language for it so general in its appeal that hereafter it may preserve in its own significance the trivial circumstances from which it first arose. Whenever a genuine love of life stirs the artist, it will be a passion for what he thinks is the best in his own day; even if he is antiquarian and takes for object of his devotion some medieval phase of life, it is medievalism in his own day that he worships. Such a passion

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

leads the writer toward the future, for since it is an ideal passion, yet to be realized, he instinctively proclaims it to posterity, or tries to; but in his search for the right language in which to utter it, he as instinctively turns to the past. To cultivate the contemporary in art is therefore as absurd as to waste effort cultivating the natural, for the present, like nature, is always with us; but the problem for the artist is to express a vision which necessarily points toward the future in language which necessarily trails from the past. We cannot remind ourselves too often that even the single words of common speech must be used by each one of us perhaps a lifetime before they are charged with emotions or sharpened to precise meanings, and before the writer can use them with full effect they must be so charged and sharpened for all his readers. The language of poetry, moreover,

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

is far more than single words; it is chiefly the metaphors and the legends, the characters and the episodes, which the race has met with so often that at last they suggest accurately to all men the same feelings and the same thoughts. Life at each moment may be on its way to become something to talk with, but only the rash would try to express a serious ideal through a picture of that life which is still near us, and therefore still imperfectly seasoned or digested. The patriotism that Shakespeare dramatized for his audience was certainly a passion for the England of Elizabeth; that is why he expressed it through Faulconbridge, the child of Richard the Lion-Hearted, or through John of Gaunt, or through Henry V. Why did he not put Elizabeth on his stage, with Raleigh and Spenser and Drake and Sidney? Was he blind to the glory of his own hour? He seems not to have been so, but

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

in his own hour neither the Queen nor any of her great courtiers was as clear a figure to the emotions as time has since made them all; the sentiment of the audience would be divided as to each one of them, the adherents to Rome still perhaps cursing Henry's daughter in their hearts, the friends of Ireland perhaps cursing the poet of the *Faerie Queene*. But the wise dramatist was on safe ground, he knew, when the audience heard their common love of country issue unprejudiced from the lips of old Gaunt, who died two centuries earlier:

This fortress, built by nature for herself,
Against infection and the hand of war;
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands;
This blessed spot, this earth, this realm, this
England.

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

When a poet turns to the past for language with which to express his love of the present or his vision of the future, he soon learns that not all epochs lend themselves with equal felicity to his purpose; he must select that aspect of the past which is adequate in nobility and energy to what he has to say, and he must select that aspect of the past which will be understood emotionally by his readers. We are prepared, every one of us perhaps, to admit the necessity of this twofold selection, but to admit so much is to admit a good deal; it is to admit that not all epochs are equally available for the language of art, and that though we exist in our own time, it may be the part of wisdom and good taste to derive our artistic speech from another period. When Molière's hero pronounces his scorn of artificial verse and contrasts with it an old song of the people, he is rejecting a fashion that was contem-

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

porary and temporary for one that was lasting. When Homer wrote of ancient Troy, or when Æneas sang the founding of Rome, either poet was choosing the date of his story with the same taste with which he selected his theme, or selected the words of which to make his lines; he was choosing what the race after long reflection had realized was dignified, noble and true in feeling. The poet, whoever he was, that left us the *Song of Roland*, no doubt was expressing a sentiment toward France which flourished in his own day, and which may have been very foreign to the feelings of the original Roland; as in the other instances, the old story had to be changed and expurgated to make it altogether the vehicle of contemporary experience; yet he was right in taking the great figure of Roland for the outer clothing or language of his emotions, since heroic sentiments had already connected themselves with

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

Charlemagne's peer, as they had not yet with William of Normandy, nor with his immediate predecessors. In English history there have been efficient and picturesque rulers in plenty, yet the poets were right who have retold their national epics in the story of Arthur rather than in the biographies of Alfred or Edward I or Cromwell; for the Arthurian legend as the race has chosen to remember it is of richer fabric emotionally and of a simpler structure than any nearer and more actual history could well be. Theodore Roosevelt, for all we know, may have been a greater man than Cromwell, and time may make him seem more significant, but if the poet wishes to say things about the strenuous life, he had better say them now through the image of Cromwell, about whom our emotions are more classified; better still if he says them through the image of King Arthur, who much more than Cromwell

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

has become a precise symbol in the imagination. Arthur was to have been the hero of Milton's epic—at least, Milton considered him for a possible hero but discarded him in favor, not of Cromwell or Hampden, but of Adam; and again the choice was wise, since Adam is still an image more universally understood than any of Milton's contemporaries, and we know what we are expected to feel when we hear his story.

To say then that in writing, even when our purpose is art and not satire, we should express ourselves in terms of the life about us, is to lay down a formula which has been contradicted in practise by the influential writers of the world. To find a language already wide-spread and therefore intelligible, the artist will always draw to some extent on the past, even though he does so unconsciously, and how far he goes back into the past will de-

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

pend on what it is he wants to express. In *Henry Esmond*, Thackeray used the age of Marlborough to express a flavor of romance that could not be said in life of a later date. But when he had satire for his purpose, as in *Vanity Fair*, he chose a period comparatively modern. It is but fair to observe, however, that Thackeray follows this principle with very uncertain skill. The period he chose for his great satire was somewhat more remote than for *Pendennis* or *The Newcomes*, where his purpose was less obviously and exclusively moral; the resulting effect in each case is somewhat peculiar, since most of us, unless we count up the dates, perhaps get the impression that *Vanity Fair* was the contemporary book. In one sense it makes little difference, and we might use the illustration to indicate that it is the method of treatment, rather than the life portrayed, that will make a book seem

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

contemporary. But we are left to wonder also whether Thackeray did not intend *Vanity Fair* to be more satirical in its effect than it actually is, and *The Newcomes* to be less so. Did the great but easy-going artist make here a careless choice of the time for his story?

Even the writers who seem now to have been most contemporary were really not so; what seems contemporary in them are eternal aspects of life, which even in their day were old. We sometimes doubt the value of those scholarly labors which search out for us the sources, so-called, of the great poets, the residuum of earlier times which they adapted to express their genius; but these labors would be justified sufficiently by the answer they give to those who think that art speaks through contemporary life. They think that we should look in our heart and write, as Sidney did, or return directly to nature, as

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

did Wordsworth, forgetting that when Sidney looked in his heart to write, he wrote some masterly translations and paraphrases of earlier Italian or French poems, and that when Wordsworth drew on his personal experience, as in the immortal lines to the Cuckoo, he recast an earlier fine poem by Michael Bruce. The believers in the contemporary urge us to paint the record of our own times as immediately as Chaucer wove his neighbors into the tapestry of the Canterbury Tales; they do not know how many versions there were of the famous tales before Chaucer shaped them to his own purposes. Indeed, so much of the past has gone into all that we now are or say or do, that the attempt to detach ourselves from the best that has gone before is in a way a denial of contemporary character to our own times, or to any other period; for the quality of civilization in 1923 which distinguishes it

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

from civilization in 1823 is the gift, for good or evil, of the hundred years in between; and to be contemporary with any moment in history is to be aware of all the past that still is articulate in that moment.

III

If a writer fails to use the past as the language with which to express his present, the reason may be that he does not know the past, or that he has theoretical objections to using it so, even though the great writers have followed no other method. But this reason is rarely the true one. Today as at other times any sincere writer will be interested in the great examples of his art, and will find them out, and probably the same instincts will eventually show themselves in his work as in the work of his predecessors. Undoubtedly there are poets and novelists today who through a mistaken cult of the natural are striving for a strictly contemporary utterance—rejecting, that

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

is, all that they can recognize in our speech as having a history. If their scholarship were more complete, they would have to reject even the meagre vocabulary of word, image and legend they are now content to use. But the writer who willingly would avail himself of the full inheritance in his art finds himself limited perhaps for another reason—he finds that his readers do not know the past, that many of them cultivate an ignorance of it, and that, therefore, if he uses it to speak with, he may not be understood. It is part of the discipline which every art imposes on those who practise it, that they must speak in terms intelligible to their audience. It remains to ask, of course, who are the audience? and the writer, if he is sufficiently courageous, stubborn, or hopeful, may choose to address a more intelligent audience than he finds in his day, an audience who he thinks will at last recover the tra-

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

ditional tongue in which he speaks, and for whom it will be worth his while to wait.

This may seem to some of us the only way out, but we know it is a precarious way. Such a brilliant belated justification came to the Greek classics at the Renaissance; it has come in music to such a giant as Bach, who was, as we say, ahead of his own day; but to expect it to come to us merely because our contemporaries do not appreciate us is entirely too obvious a self-flattery. The sane artist will rather do his best to say what he has to say in language his day understands, and he will try also to encourage his audience in the recovery of a larger language, so that he may say more to them.

This question whether the reader has sufficient command of the inherited language of literature is always an acute one for the author; the lasting successes in literature have been made at those

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

moments when a knowledge of the past was wide-spread, and the audience were as familiar with the older literature as the writers were. Historical as Virgil seems to us in the *Æneid*, almost antiquarian, he offered to his first readers nothing they were not familiar with, and little that would not immediately kindle an emotion. In one sense then he may be said to have spoken in a contemporary language. But neither he nor his audience would have understood the doctrine that art becomes great by being contemporary, and that it becomes contemporary by discrediting the past. "To have great poets, there must be great audiences too", said Whitman, and here, as elsewhere, we are coming to realize, he got at the permanent truth of the matter. For it is a sound observation of literary historians that a country exercises its impulses toward art, in any period, as much

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

by what it reads of the older books as by what it writes; the two activities must go together if the contemporary great writer is to get a competent hearing, and they must be studied together if we are to estimate justly the culture of an epoch. In what was produced, some decades of the eighteenth century in England look to us destitute of poetry, but in those very moments Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton were widely loved, and enjoyed perhaps a more humane and significant treatment from the critics than they have often had since. The weakness of contemporary poetry in Addison's time, in Warton's and Gray's, was not that they knew the elder masters, but that their practise departed so widely from them and became so contemporary. The revival in the romantic age was brought about by rejecting the kind of art the early eighteenth century wrote, and by building on the still

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

earlier art the eighteenth century had the wisdom to love.

In our day and in our land the question of the audience is peculiarly acute, and it has been rendered more so by the intentional efforts of those who believe that literature should be contemporary. Even without those efforts we, who come from many countries, with different race memories and with the legacy of different cultures, should have had difficulty enough to achieve a common language adequately rich in the best things of the past and welded into some continuity with our American future. If we write in those terms which to an Italian would be emotional, we shall hardly stir the pulses of a Scotchman or a Slav, and if we waken the race-memories of the Spanish or the French, we may leave quite cold the Dutch in Pennsylvania or the Swede in Minnesota. Our first hope, to which some of us

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

still desperately cling, is that we may lose no one of these racial inheritances, but that by a jealous conserving and study of each of them, and by teaching them all to our children, we may build up one of the richest cultures that the accidents of migration have ever permitted the race to compose. The literature of America in a thousand years would carry in its majestic overtones the essential beauty of all the civilizations that have made their entry through our ports, the essential beauty too of the wonderful Indian civilizations which our European coming dispossessed, and above these overtones, perhaps, the far-off suggestions of the Greek and Roman worlds and the immemorial East.

But this hope, whether or not it could be realized, is so far as we can see at present a fantastic dream; our progress toward it has been slight—better, to be frank, we have made no progress, rather

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

we have lost ground. There is less general culture of that sort in the United States now than there was fifty years ago. It has seemed wise to many of us, therefore, to moderate our hopes, and to aim at mastering, not all our heritages in common, but at least one tradition, and that the tradition of this country from the revolution till the present day. Such a program might be carried out in our schools—not in the colleges, since only a fraction of the country's youth gets to college, but in those early school years through which all the boys and girls may reasonably be expected to pass; and there would be nothing illogical in burdening the schools with the task, for the training of a common consciousness, cultural or otherwise, in a land of immigrants is the chief problem of elementary education. We thought, then, that we might all absorb our own past and the few decades that preceded our coming,

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

so that hereafter the spokesmen of the nation, poets, dramatists, preachers, statesmen, might at least touch some common chords in us all by naming those who built up the opportunities we enjoy. This program is still in force in other departments of study than literature, but the teachers of literature have been largely won over to the cult of the contemporary; so far from building up in the land a great audience for the great poets to sing to, many energetic teachers of literature are persuading these children, if persuasion is necessary, to read only books of the day, about things of the day, and by inference to neglect as really negligible anything written yesterday or written about other times and other problems than ours. Our dream of a cosmopolitan culture has shrunk in practise to an educational discipline which will make us more insular and provincial than we are already, more selfish, more con-

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

temptuous of other times and of other peoples, and still further disinherited from great art.

The movement began a few years ago in a protest against the narrow choice of books permitted by the requirements for entrance to college. Some of the schools thought they could do their best work if their teachers—and their pupils—could select the books for this arduous study; there could be some wise consulting of taste, some adaptation to special temperaments. So long as the choice was still to be made from books of recognized merit, it was unreasonable to deny this request. But the trend toward the contemporary developed quickly; if we consulted the taste and the temperament of our students, the children of many racial traditions, we found that few of the older writers were easy for them to understand; the difficulty of bridging over the gap between

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

traditions was too great for many of our teachers to solve, or perhaps they themselves were not at home in the tradition either of the books or of the students; and the most graceful form of surrender was to study only what was easy for everybody. The process was paralleled in society outside of the schoolroom, in the change in ideals and in competence which overtook professed criticism in our reviews; but the heart of the matter was and still is in the centers of education.

A teacher of English in New York City recently presented the case for contemporary literature vs. the classics, in some such argument as this: When she was in college, she said, the faculty took such an inhospitable view of the world about them that only one author, of all those they studied in literature classes, was still alive when they studied his books. She and her fellow students felt somehow cramped

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

and cheated, not to be studying more books of which the authors were still living. In other words, whereas the critics in Mr. Shaw's play could not judge the work till they knew who wrote it, these lovers of the contemporary could not estimate a book till they knew whether the author was in or out of the graveyard. In these better days, the teacher went on to say, she and her colleagues allow for the natural desire of their students to read what is written at the moment—a life of a prominent man like Theodore Roosevelt, the work of a columnist in the daily press, the popular plays, the most talked-of novels. Such reading, she explained, gives opportunity for ethical or social or political discussion in class; she meant, it seems, that you can argue whether the Middle West was fairly portrayed, and if so, what should be done to cure it, or whether we should have gone into the war

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

at all, or if so, what should have been done to make the lot of the private easier, and establish the officer on a less privileged plane. Out of this open discussion of spontaneous interest in current events, will come, she thought, a finer taste for the best in art.

It is obvious that the training, such as it is, which is to produce this finer taste is a training not in art at all, but in Americanization, if you choose to call it so, in sociology or in politics. These purposes are good in their place, but if they usurp the classroom where literature as an art should be taught, we need expect no aid from the schools in training us to a common culture, not at least so far as the word applies to poetry, to romance, to the drama, to the novel. We might Americanize ourselves in literature by reading our older poets—three of them, Whitman, Poe and Emerson, of influence in the

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

whole world today; we might read our elder novelists, two of whom, Cooper and Hawthorne, at their best were among the prose-poets of the nineteenth century; or we might read Parkman, an historian not likely to be surpassed for the beauty of his spirit, for the solidity of his method, and for the romantic charm of his subject, by any who will hereafter write about this land. We might read Lincoln, about whom we talk so much, and we might profitably read Jefferson and Hamilton. We might even discover the charm of the colonial records, north and south, and the heroic poetry of our frontier, as it pushed through wilderness and across plain and canyon, to face at last the Orient again and our inscrutable future. This kind of Americanization would produce class discussion of some dignity, even though it had nothing to do immediately with the art of literature, for it would give us, not

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

only a sense of our common destiny, but an escape from our own circumstances into other days and other minds, and it would cultivate the sympathy and the imagination once thought to be the fruit of literary study. But to discuss always and exclusively only what is under our own noses, to study a life of Mr. Roosevelt not because it is a great biography but because it is about Mr. Roosevelt, and to study novels not because they are good novels, but because they are about us, is to find ourselves in the end just where we were in the beginning, with our prejudices more firmly rooted and our skin a bit thicker to any joy or sorrow in the world not our own. As for the ability to understand great writing when it comes to us, we have learned only this, that since Mr. Roosevelt lived nearer our day than Dr. Johnson, the biography of him is a better biography and a more interesting one than

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

Boswell could write, and we need not read Boswell; and since Main Street is nearer to us than Salem, Mr. Lewis is a greater novelist than Hawthorne, and we need not read Hawthorne. Enough to know that the whole contains the part.

IV

Well, then, says the teacher of current literature, there never can be any great books, for you approve of nothing contemporary, and every book, unfortunately, has to be written in its own time. Yes, in a sense, anything you write, on however remote a subject, will be of your time and will represent it; Walter Pater was expressing one phase of Victorian England when he wrote *Marius the Epicurean*. But the artist hopes to appeal to more than the present generation; even the most contemporary of our contemporaries, who read no books of which the authors are not living, cherish some ambition to have their own works read after they themselves are gone. And since the fame of a book de-

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

pend on its ability to meet the interest of readers over a long period of time, the life of our works will depend on two things—on our gift for selecting the matter which is permanently interesting to men, and on the willingness or unwillingness of any generation to be interested in the same things as its predecessors. If readers are now brought up to neglect as a matter of course any works of literature that once were loved, there will be no fame for any one hereafter, and no masters of the art, but only in each publishing season a nine days' wonder. But if human nature still asserts its primal interests, in spite of mistaken teaching, and continues to like in the long run the same things that have been loved in the past, then the writer will finally be reckoned great who answers, not the mood of his hour, but the spirit of those constant demands. He will get his inspiration from life as he knows it; he will

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

express it in an eternal form, as we say—at least in a form so durable that instead of our understanding his work through the incident that inspired it, we shall know of the incident through the work. Molière has so immortalized one moment of his times in his *Précieuses Ridicules*; without the play, would we know much of the temporary affectation? And to be quite frank, has not something died in the play, along with what was contemporary in it, so that we enjoy it now with an historical effort not needed to be at home, let us say, with Falstaff? Tennyson really immortalized the Charge of the Light Brigade, for the incident on so many grounds has since proved regrettable that we should be glad to forget it, but for the poem, and we begin to be sorry that the poem is anchored to so much that was transitory. Our own civil war poet, Henry Howard Brownell, true genius if we ever had one,

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

wrote his verses on the very scene, after the fights he had passed through as Farragut's secretary on the flagship, and the virulence of contemporary passion is in his work forever, an embarrassing alloy. But of the danger of being contemporary, Dante is the great illustration. It is not hard to see what an impact his great poem must have made on his first hearers, it was so immediate in its reference to persons, places, incidents, crimes and disasters which Florence, Rome and Italy well knew; but what an effort it is now to recover all those allusions to the times, indeed how impossible! We wrestle with them, if at all, because the greatness of the poem bears up their leaden weight; and the poem is great for what is least contemporary in it, for the vision which Dante drew from his masters, and which he handed on to the future in images of the past.

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

The impulse to be contemporary is in our time, and perhaps always was, an impulse to tell the news. This impulse is felt perhaps in all the arts, but most in books and in the theatre, less in music, still less in painting, and least in architecture and sculpture. From these last we can learn, if we need a reminder, what are the conditions of enduring art, and what, in contrast to popularity, is fame. Sculpture and architecture, from the substantial nature of their medium, must submit to be looked at more than once, to be lived with, finally to be judged by the good opinions of many men over a long period of time; and a good opinion of such work, so lived with, will depend less on the first impression than on habitual contact. For such work popularity is difficult, if not impossible. A book about the war may be a popular book; the Farragut statue in Madison Square is not a popular statue.

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

What statue is popular? It can have only the better kind of success, if any; like the Farragut, it can be famous, loved and returned to over an indefinite length of time. For we can read a book once and throw it aside, or hear music or see a play but once, and then criticize it; it lies entirely in our choice whether we shall read or hear twice. How different our criticism would be if it were based on at least half a dozen readings and hearings! But the bronze and the building are not easily removed or ignored, and even the painting has a good chance of being looked at more than once. It is not surprising then that the sculptor, like the architect or the painter, attends to the conditions on which fame is secured, since popularity is denied him, and makes his appeal to revised judgments and to second thoughts.

It would be a misfortune to seem to say that the author who misses popularity is

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

necessarily an artist, or that even temporary success is not to be admired. But in American letters we are beginning to wonder why our great successes are so transitory; why a writer who sells more copies of his first book than did Thackeray or Dickens, does not continue like them to reach a large public with succeeding books; and why he does not, like them, continue to be read after he has ceased to write. The explanation suggested is that most American writers, not only today but throughout the last twenty-five years, have written as journalists—have put out their material not as life but as news about life, and the critics have discussed it as news, and the readers have come to look for the news in it, and for nothing else. Some novelists still writing began their work with successful stories of local color, which we read in order to learn about Louisiana or Pennsylvania or the Middle

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

West, and having got the information we were looking for, we went elsewhere to look into other novelties. It goes without saying that in this process we readers have done injustice to many a work of art; *Old Creole Days* and *Main Traveled Roads* have something for the permanent reader, as well as for the news-seeker, and *Trilby*—to speak of an English book—is still a magnificent romance of friendship and chivalry, though it expired of its own success as a bulletin from the Latin Quarter and a document in hypnotism.

At least, says again the lover of current things, you must write in the language of the hour. Some beauty is lost when the poet does not speak in his native tongue, or when we cannot read him in it. Well, some languages are better than others; Greek was a better language, more precise, more varied, more forceful and more colorful, than English or any of the mod-

THE CULT OF THE CONTEMPORARY

ern tongues. But all language changes, as the works of art in language do not; in literature we have this haunting paradox, that through a temporary medium we can build something imperishable. Much as we may dislike literature in translation, it is perhaps salutary to remember that literary masterpieces must survive in translation or not at all. In what language were the parables spoken? If Homer were not Homer still in English or French or German, how much of Homer would the world know? Some bouquet of his own time is gone, but perhaps we should not have liked it if it had remained. At least we have kept what we liked; we have kept what suited our spiritual needs, we have loved Andromache and Hector, and wondered in the old way why such fine men as Achilles and Agamemnon should quarrel, and have decided, as all our fathers have done, that for so

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

beautiful a woman as Helen to waste her time on so mean a fellow as Paris, there must have been queer influences at work. To live in art in this timeless way, is to satisfy what is eternal in ourselves; it is to leave behind us the limitations of our hour, our place, and our language. And unless art is wide enough for us to live in it so, we shall trifle with it only for an hour, and without regret let it go the way of other contemporary things.

**THE CHARACTERS
PROPER TO LITERATURE**

V

THE CHARACTERS PROPER TO LITERATURE

I

OUR impulse might be to say that any character at all is proper to literature, or to any phase of literature, for we have long ago discarded that convention of ancient story which introduced the hero and heroine always as nobly born, or if at first they were not gentlefolk, yet in the last chapter they were shown to be prince and princess in disguise. Our leading characters now may have whatever origin God wills; the author does not interfere. No longer do we reserve the peasant, the poor or the ignorant for the foot of our

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

list of *dramatis personæ*, nor do we smuggle them into the scene at resting moments, for comic relief. Since human nature is the subject of art, and since the Almighty (we quote Lincoln for this) showed us where to put the emphasis in human nature, by creating common folk in the vast majority, we have even followed the example with an excess of enthusiasm, until the elect are pretty well put down from their former seat in literature, and in their stead are the socially humble and the mentally weak. For a hundred years or more we have been pressing this charitable revolution. Wordsworth, though not the first to try it, first won a considerable hearing in English poetry for the beggar, the pedlar, the afflicted, the half-witted—a hearing for them, that is, as central figures in the poems where they occur; and shortly afterwards the novelists, on the irresistible

PROPER CHARACTERS

tide of humanitarianism, invited not only our attention but our admiration for persons who hitherto had seemed obscure and unfortunate. Dickens perhaps went too far, we now feel; he demonstrated the weakness of the gentry, and sent them to the background of the story, where we are willing enough they should remain, but he also tried to endow the lower classes with so much delicacy, tact, and spirit that his leading persons seem to be gentry still, masquerading in a temporary eclipse of fortune, like the lost prince and princess of the fairy tale. But he taught us how to carry on his unfinished revolution; since he stripped sentimentality, all that sort of nonsense, from the gentry, we have known at last how to strip it from the bourgeois. Some of our novelists riddle the polite world for us, others tell us the unflinching truth about our middle classes. We have no heroes; any character can get into our

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

literature, if we may use him as a target rather than worship him as a god.

It is too late to return, even if we desired to do so, to the sentimental misreading of social conditions against which our modern realism, however grim, tries honestly to protest, and there is a form of discourse in which human frailties can properly be discussed; social science or the science of ethics would neither of them deserve the name of science if we excluded from their consideration any aspect of human character or conduct—just as medicine would fail in its office if we forbade it to study any part or function of the body. But it is not too late to ask ourselves the difference between science and art; between a story which represents our physical actions with that conscience in detail which would aid a medical diagnosis, and a story through which Helen's body walks, a joy forever; between a rec-

PROPER CHARACTERS

ord of our neighbors just as they are, or a bit meaner, and a picture of men and women as we would gladly be. Anything printed may be called literature, even last year's time-tables, but if we preserve in the word an emphasis upon art rather than upon information, we may ask after all whether certain characters, or certain attitudes toward character, are not essential to art; or, putting it another way, we may ask whether the type of character we portray will not determine the kind of art we produce, with or without our will, and whether the kind of character we portray will not finally classify our writing for us as art or as social document.

To have our novel appraised as a social document may seem to us a compliment, and we may be glad to escape the equivocal verdict that our picture of life is art. The terms are unimportant and our prejudices in words may be respected. But the

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

fact remains that some books we are to read many times, and permanently, whereas others are for a season only, and may be read but once; and books which must serve us in ways so different would seem to need certain special privileges of method and material—they may even be permitted certain varieties of emphasis not usually found in life. The temporary writing helps us on our way, and we ought to have one honorable name for it all—newspapers, telephone directory, timetables, all our telegrams and most of our letters. We stop over them only for a moment, in order to go about our business more conveniently. But the other kind of books will detain us forever, or will try to—and this kind of literature is art; we return thither for no information and for no immediate aid in our daily affairs, but rather to taste again an experience we enjoyed before, to meet old friends, to

PROPER CHARACTERS

breathe an atmosphere which we crave, and which is hard to find elsewhere.

If this distinction needs often to be made between the literature which is information and the literature which is art, it is because both kinds of book use the same medium, and speech is the commonest of mediums. Painting or music escape such a confusion, but writing is a slippery craft, now running to a bare record or to good advice, now drifting into a music of words, articulating a beauty that seems ageless and impersonal, and sometimes doing a bit of all these things at once. In daily conversation, when we talk of anything in human interest, we use the same words as literature is made of; what more natural than to conclude that literature therefore may deal with any subject we talk of? We resent the suggestion that art should be narrower than life itself. Yet if we admit any difference at all be-

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

tween art and life, between literature and our average conversations, between books which give information and books which give delight, and if art is the record of that aspect of life we delight in not for the moment but permanently, then art is indeed narrower than life itself; outside of it will remain the trivial things, however likable, of our daily round, which we forget gladly, so many other pleasant and trivial things supplant them; and outside of it also will remain very important issues which we hope and resolve shall be temporary—the grave wrongs and errors which call not for eternal contemplation but for reform. Face to face with such problems, we often feel that art is inadequate. What can poetry do for the sick or the dying? What solace is there in music or sculpture for the wretchedly poor? The answer to such questions is not in art but in conduct;

PROPER CHARACTERS

death calls for fortitude, sickness must be cured, poverty must be relieved; and if books deal with such subjects, it is not for a literary end, but to aid us in practical remedies. Indeed, to have a literary ambition as we contemplate another's misery, would seem possible only for a fiend; it is in the merit of Mrs. Stowe's story of Uncle Tom that the book seems a protest from the soul rather than a work of art. If there are sins and misfortunes, it may be necessary to spread the news, as though the house were on fire, but if we really care for our house we shall not linger to enjoy the cadence of the thrilling call. On the other hand, if we are to lose ourselves in a book or a play, if we are to live in it repeatedly, ourselves the hero, in love with the heroine, and hating the villain, then the book or play must give us an experience in some sense better than the life ordinarily available to us; who would

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

waste a moment on Cleopatra in a book, if he knew where to find her in the world? Or perhaps in life she was less charming than Plutarch said she was, or than Shakespeare showed her to be; perhaps we could not be drawn irresistibly to her until the poet made her better than she was—made her, that is, a character proper for the literature which is to be enjoyed as art.

II

The effect of the excellence or the inferiority of the character on the book was long ago observed by Aristotle, when he said that tragedy and the epic—that is, all serious literature—will aim at representing men as better than in actual life, and that comedy and satire will represent them as worse. In this second kind of writing, he added, satire came first, and it was Homer who laid down the principles of comedy, by dramatizing the ludicrous instead of composing personal satire. This famous observation of the ancient critic has been too often read as doctrine, as though Aristotle were telling us what should take place in literature, whereas he is recording what actually does

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

take place. If you wish to write a story or a play in which the reader can lose himself with delight, you must portray character better than the reader, character which in some degree satisfies and strengthens his aspirations. If you wish the reader to laugh at the world, or to scorn it, or to feel the need of improving it, you portray for him character in a condition inferior to his estimate of himself; if you wish him to profit by that wholesome self-observation which we call the comic-spirit, you mingle satire with tragedy—you show him character which satisfies his aspirations, so that he will identify himself with it, and which at the same time is inferior in some respects to what he would prefer to be, so that he must laugh at himself. He will have a tendency to save the day for self-respect by laughing, not at himself, but at human nature, and the universal comic spirit will then have come to birth,

PROPER CHARACTERS

akin to both satire and tragedy, but more nearly a dramatizing of the ludicrous, as Aristotle said, than a scoring of personal faults.

These principles, it goes without saying, are not accepted by writers today; the average author is not aware of them, or if he is, he takes refuge in another remark of Aristotle's, that perhaps tragedy was destined to develop into something different from the type of poetry produced by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides; perhaps new principles, we say, in the too familiar formula, are needed for new material. So think many of our poets and novelists who give us sordid and wretched characters to contemplate, yet invite us to feel toward them not the satiric regret, but the old pity and terror of noble tragedy. That the principles do persist, however, very much as Aristotle described them, is evidenced by the diffi-

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

culty the readers still have with such books; the authors argue their case, or critics argue it for them, but common humanity remains unconvinced that misery is a proper subject for permanent contemplation. In our age especially, when the impulse to social good works is highly developed, it is a curious paradox that writers should expect us to associate in art, as habitual companions, with types of character which in real life we should hasten to rescue and to change. It is generous of the writers to suppose that in a humane age the reader will be ready to discern the heroic even beneath handicaps and afflictions, and probably the reader is thus ready, but the writers forget that in any age, particularly in a humane one, we do not like to contemplate, in the permanence of art, heroic character smothered beneath handicaps and afflictions. And in justice to the

PROPER CHARACTERS

embarrassed reader it should be added that often the character is not heroic at all, and the only claim put forth for it is that it might have been attractive if it had not been smothered.

Perhaps it is the influence of Wordsworth that still spreads this confusion in our writing. The effect of many of his best known poems has never been wholly satisfactory, not even to his admirers; he drew moral lessons from objects humble or mean, and since his own interest was in the moral lesson, he sometimes was careless of the emotional appeal which the object, left standing as it were in the poem, might make on the reader. In one sense he was not a nature-lover, though he had recourse to nature for ethical wisdom; it was only the wisdom he cared about, and we have an unpleasant impression, which perhaps does him injustice, that when he had got a moral idea out

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

of the primrose by the river's brim, he was through with the primrose for the day. The same impression, unfortunately, is made by his portrayal of humble or mean characters. He obviously does not identify his better fortunes with their misery, nor does he enter dramatically or imaginatively into their lives; he is content to draw a moral from them, and the reader, in his day and still in ours, is surprised that misery in the picture, having produced a moral, is promptly dropped as though of no further concern. The old leech-gatherer serves a purpose when his courage against frightful odds cheers up a moodish poet; the old beggar at the door moves us to gratitude that another man's poverty keeps fresh in us our springs of charity. Much good this does the leech-gatherer or the beggar! And if there is to be no help for them, their presence is a bit disturbing in the background

PROPER CHARACTERS

of so much complacence. We wish there were more tenderness in these poems that talk so much of feeling. And when Wordsworth deliberately sets out to enlist our admiration for the heroic, we may find ourselves facing such dumb human misery as we have in *Michael*, the heroism of a wrecked family and an abandoned farm. With relief we turn to the passages in the *Prelude* where the poet no longer looks down benignly on the wretched, but gives expression to the ideal life which he himself desires to attain; there, where he shows life better than it is, we can go with him and lose ourselves in the vision.

It is our poets who chiefly defy Aristotle's wise warning, and try with Wordsworth to convert into a theme for meditation what is really a subject for philanthropy. Our novelists tend more and more to give us an inferior world, but not for our admiration; we may smile at it,

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

or despise it, or try to cure it. This is satire, an achievement in morals rather than in art, and from the advertisements on the book covers it is clear that the publisher at least knows that the author is revealing something medicinal, something unpleasant but good for us. If we prefer to write satires, we are at least achieving our ambition. But the reader of the American novel today, whether he reads Mrs. Wharton, or Sinclair Lewis, or whether he goes back to an earlier period and reads W. D. Howells, is usually reading about other people, rarely about himself; he has noticed those faults in his neighbors before. We have to go far back in our literature to find a novel in which the American future is implicit, a story into which we can enter as into a world we are glad is ours. Perhaps we must go back as far as the *Scarlet Letter*, in which a modern audacity of thought seems break-

PROPER CHARACTERS

ing through an antique repression, and we can identify profound speculations of our own with the wisdom in Hester's heart or Arthur Dimmesdale's. It has been pointed out before how much Hawthorne gained by making his chief characters noble in the Greek way, tragic characters better than in actual life; for the sin of the woman and the minister was common enough in the world among weak or vulgar characters, and the impulse even in Hawthorne's time might well have been to keep the story, for purposes of edification or realism, in the low tone in which it first occurred. But we cannot easily take to heart the sins of people who are obviously our inferiors; only the sins of good people rouse in us tragic pity or terror, for that is the kind of sin, if any, we should commit. Hawthorne therefore makes the minister a saint, and if Hester is not a saint at the beginning, she is so

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

at the end of her ordeal, and in the sufferings of both our own heart has been wrung. In the *House of the Seven Gables*, however, the reader is a looker-on rather than an actor, for the characters are not better than life, their experience is therefore not ours, and since we cannot cure their unhappiness, we are sorry to watch it. In that story our greatest romancer was on the road toward the modern habit of satire, a road which he had marked out for us clearly enough in some of his early sketches and tales.

The trend away from the literature of art to the literature of satire is all the more remarkable in our day because the exigencies of satire compel the American to deny wholesale his better self. There might be some apparent reason for not writing in the epic or the tragic tone if in order to do so we had to assume virtues we all knew we lacked; but why make a

PROPER CHARACTERS

religion of writing satire, when to do so we must conceal the few virtues we are sure we have? Mr. Howells took it to be his duty to tell the unvarnished truth about human society as he knew it, but you would not guess from his novels that America ever produced so charming a man as Mr. Howells and those literary friends of his of whom, outside his novels, he wrote lovingly. So Mr. Lewis pictures America today—leaving out of the picture the satirical criticism of America in which he leads, and so Mrs. Wharton shows us the narrower world of fashion, with no one in it so gifted, so admirably trained, as Mrs. Wharton. The best of us is hard enough to express, as Rabbi Ben Ezra knew, but how odd that we prefer not to express it, whether difficult or easy—that we deliberately conceal what we have set our hearts on. We name half a dozen characters from his plays in

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

whom Shakespeare seems to be portraying himself, and without too subtle a discrimination we recognize ideals of our own in all of them. Pendennis seems to be Thackeray himself, and so seems Henry Esmond and Clive Newcome, and we flatter ourselves that the great novelist incorporated in those portraits some of our own best features. We—and Cervantes—are incarnated in Don Quixote.

The contrast between information and art in our books, and the tendency to stress information with a moral bent, are both thrown into sharper relief by the success of American architecture in expressing more and more a significant and lasting beauty. Nothing might seem at first more utilitarian than a building, and few things in our country seem less permanent, we have such a passion for altering. Yet art has made its greatest progress with us in architecture, and the stages of the prog-

PROPER CHARACTERS

ress have been accompanied by just such a selection and choice of subject as Aristotle's remarks about character would imply. In our cities a genuine impulse toward beauty began to show itself two decades ago in shop-windows. Where else should beauty appear but in the enterprises we care most about? Since we were lovers of business, we began to indicate the beauty that business has in our eyes. The shop-window ceased to be, what in country hardware stores it still often is, a place where samples of all the merchandise were displayed, an order card from which you could plan your purchases; it became rather a scene of loveliness to contemplate for its own sake, an attraction to hold you rooted to the spot rather than a stimulus to hurry you inside to buy. Probably the shop-windows in our great streets could not be justified now on a purely economic basis; they have been

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

lifted into the realm of beauty and are things to remember. But for this kind of shop-window not every article the store sells is "proper", in the Aristotelian sense; nothing ridiculous is shown, though ridiculous things are bought and sold, nothing trivial is shown, and nothing that discloses too publicly the animal conditions in which we lead our spiritual life. With a different selection of articles which the store for our convenience must sell, we might have a comic window, the sight of which would cause us to smile at ourselves, or a satiric one, which would teach us to laugh at our fellowman.

The buildings themselves, moreover, have become beautiful by expressing what we genuinely love to contemplate, and not all kinds of buildings were proper to that happy end. For mere sale and barter, any shed in the market-place might serve, but if we think of traffic in the large way

PROPER CHARACTERS

that Ruskin suggested, as something potentially heroic and noble, as a feeding of the hungry and a clothing of the naked, as a soldierly occupying of outposts against poverty and wretchedness, as a campaign of conquest against nature, and as an exchange at last of spiritual hungers and satisfactions among men, then our houses of business should look like temples. So they begin to look, and only a very blind critic here and there still fails to see that so they should look. With our love of traffic goes our love of travel. In this country travel is necessary, but it is also an ideal. Any sort of railway station will serve as a place to buy a ticket or board a train, and until recently almost any kind of barracks did serve for those purposes. But the haphazard building could not express our delight in travel, our enjoyment of distance and speed and punctilious arrivings and departings. The pleasant

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

casualness of the stage-coach and the roadside inn does not really appeal to us, except in exotic moments; our religion of travel is uttered in the Pennsylvania Station in New York, and in other such structures fast rising throughout the country, where the ritualistic atmosphere, produced by carefully selected elements from the buildings of antiquity, have little to do with buying your ticket and a great deal to do with the American spirit. We breathe more freely as we enter them, and enjoy the space and the height; our instinctive comment is, "This is something like!" as though some part of us had found expression at last. And if this success in architecture is as yet in the field of business and travel, among public buildings, the reason probably is that in those fields we know what our aspirations are. In ecclesiastical architecture, by way of contrast, we are less clear. We feel that if

PROPER CHARACTERS

the Woolworth building is so lovely, it is but respectable to improve the appearance of our churches, so we put up very wonderful Gothic chapels and cathedrals—only to find, perhaps, that they are a sort of weight on our conscience rather than an expression of our desires; we sometimes try to cultivate the religion that produced them, in order that so eloquent a language may have more content in its words.

When we turn back from our architecture to our books, we have the right to ask why poetry and the novel address themselves exclusively to what is in essence satire, to the portrayal of us as worse than we are, or with our aspirations left out; why we as readers must be invited to absorb mere information about ourselves and our country; why we so seldom meet in the pages offered to us the kind of men and women we admire or ought to admire. The arts all express the same thing, at any

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

given moment, and if we are equally proficient in them, they ought to achieve the same grandeur and the same beauty. Against the trivial and drab contents of much of our poetry and the condescending realism of much of our prose American architecture now stands, a reproach and an indictment; for the imaginative power and sweep of our buildings is hardly discernible in our books. The architects have followed old wisdom, by making their work ideal, better than life. The writers, in a stubborn wrong-headedness, in defiance of the readers' psychology, portray characters worse than in actual life, and sometimes ask us to admire them.

III

To ask what characters are proper to literature as an art, and to point out that the character better than life will express our ideals, and that the character worse than life will invite our satire, is only to raise in another way the old problems of the universal as against the particular in art, of the contemporary as against the eternal. To be strictly personal is in the end to be contemporary, and to be strictly contemporary is to give, whether or not we intend it, the effect of satire. If our picture of life is to appeal to the reader, and to many readers, as their own world, not simply as their neighbors' private house into which they are prying, it must have general human truth beyond what is

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

strictly personal; and if it is to be read with that sense of proprietorship by many people over a stretch of time, it must not limit itself to the peculiarities of any one moment. It is true that the writer himself lives but one life and is circumscribed by time and place; if there were no such thing as imagination he would only record what he is, for the enlightenment of others who are just like him; without imagination he would not know of a better character than his, or of a worse one, and we should be spared the discipline of satire, but at the price of art. The problem for the writer, as for any other artist, is to imagine the lives of other men, and the lives that he and other men aspire to; his business is to select from personal adventure what is generally important, and to see it against the background of universal experience. Can any one imagine universal experience? Perhaps not, but the

PROPER CHARACTERS

nearer he comes to this difficult success the more readers the world over will find meaning in what he writes. To have a personal career is no ground for conceit in an artist—every one has as much; the achievement is to state our experience so that it is the experience of other people too.

If we portray characters as better than in actual life, there is no great difficulty in making them seem universal; for it is a radical gift in human conceit to fancy that anything admirable or desirable has a possible connection with ourselves. If we do not at first discover what there is in common between Romeo or Lincoln or Achilles or General Lee and ourselves, yet if we admire them we shall find the resemblance, or try to create it. This is the power of great imaginative art, that the admirable things in it generate a kind of universal emulation, and the story or

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

statue which has been said to imitate nature succeeds at last in persuading men and women quite naturally to imitate it. The power of a great book over human conduct, even its influence at last upon what might seem instinctive conduct, is immeasurable. In the troubadour art of love before Dante's time, a true lover was taught to turn pale at sight of his lady, and at the unexpected sight of her to faint; Dante loved that literature, and he grew pale and fainted by second nature—just as women once learned to blush at certain things, and afterward learned not to blush. How many lives were affected, for good or evil, throughout Europe and America, by the alluring power of Byron's heroes and heroines? The poet, then, who represents character as better than actual life, as possessing, that is, something that we desire but have not, has already made his hero universal,

PROPER CHARACTERS

and must some day accept the responsibility of having dedicated his readers to that general ideal. We may question Byron on moral grounds by asserting that his hero, after whom so many lives were patterned, was really not deserving of any imitation; just as an Oriental reformer from India might tell us that the traffic and travel of which our architecture is an expression are both of them trivial enterprises, mere distractions from the contemplative ends of life. But such criticism lies outside of art. To understand the discipline which art imposes on us it is enough to observe the kind of character which does make an ideal effective in literature, and the kind that precipitates us into satire.

The real difficulty for the writer is not, then, in generalizing the characters which embody his ideal, and which therefore are better than in actual life; what he will

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

chiefly need for his success is to have the ideals. But even with a consciousness of deep aspiration he may wish to include in the picture whole characters or parts of character which are not what they should be, and which yet are likable, even lovable; and to give this double effect of inferiority in some sense, together with charm in some sense, is, it seems, very difficult, for this is the effect of comedy, and comedy is rare in any literature, almost entirely absent from our own. If you represent a character as worse than in actual life, the condescending attitude of the reader will not automatically draw the portrait into some universal relation; the writer must add something universally admirable to the particular weakness we look down on. Beatrice and Benedick have exhausted their wit, and they are the victims of a plot to marry them off to each other; for such inferiority to their com-

PROPER CHARACTERS

panions we cannot admire them. But Shakespeare makes them both loyal to their friends and generous in their delight in life, and Beatrice has the good sense to know innocence when she sees it; these qualities we can identify with our own virtues, and for these we admire the hero and heroine. The poet further generalizes both characters by reminding us through their meditations that to fall in love is not the work of reason, and that even the wittiest scoffers succumb; here too we gladly recognize our own experience. We can therefore smile at the foibles of the young people, partly because these foibles are incident to all human nature, and partly because, even with the foibles, we like to identify ourselves in imagination with the supplementary virtues. Socrates was trying to persuade Aristophanes and Agathon, in the gray dawn after the Symposium, that the art of comedy and the

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

art of tragedy are the same; and so far at least he was right, in that the universal rendering which character must receive in both, gives to the comic effect some of the pity, though none of the terror, which tragedy evokes. But Socrates did not say that the art of tragedy is identical with the art of satire.

When comedy is at its best—that is, when we have made the inferior character universal by showing that its faults are natural, or by adding to it some general virtues—we may indeed go further and say that comedy produces perhaps the terror as well as the pity of tragedy, and that the two kinds of writing are, as Socrates said, but one. The tragic or epic hero, portrayed as better than in actual life, may have faults, but so far from despising him on that account, we may not even smile; we like him so much that the faults seem his misfortune. Moreover, if

PROPER CHARACTERS

we refer the weakness of the comic character to nature itself, how can we be hard on the individual? And if we add to the faults positive and lovable virtues, will not the comic character seem at last to be tragic? In English drama Falstaff is perhaps the prince of comic characters, so vitally imagined that he lives on the stage apart from any plot; he is a living person, with no virtues at all, yet infinitely likable. He can be played to make the groundlings laugh, but most of us after we have laughed taste profound tragedy in what we have laughed at. He is almost majestic in those moments of cowardice when he portrays himself exactly as he is—when he sees himself, as it were, from outside, and points to those aspects of his frailty which belong to mankind. An actor might play the scenes on the battlefield in *Henry IV* so as to inspire, not laughter at the fat knight's depravity, but

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

a pitiful and self-accusing silence. When he finds the corpse of Sir Walter Blunt, just slain—"Soft! who are you? Sir Walter Blunt!—There's Honour for you! Here's no vanity! . . . I have led my ragamuffins where they are peppered; there's but three of my hundred and fifty left alive, and they are for the town's end, to beg during life. . . . I like not such grinning honour as Sir Walter hath. Give me life; which if I can save, so; if not, honour comes unlooked for."

In French drama Molière brought comedy to an excellence not matched, perhaps, in any other literature, and no imaginative writing is richer than his in general ideas. We laugh at the amusing situation, or delight in the frankly artificial balancing of the plot, but on second thoughts we fall silent, contemplating the universal sweep of humanity, ourselves included, which he has uncovered for us.

PROPER CHARACTERS

The most obvious example for American readers is in *Tartuffe*, where the unhappy Elmire has difficulty in proving to her husband Orgon that Tartuffe, whom he greatly admires, is a treacherous friend and is actually making love to her. She finally admits Tartuffe to her room, having first hidden her husband under the table, from which he has promised to emerge if Tartuffe should go beyond the bounds of decency. Tartuffe, of course, makes love in the clearest terms to his friend's wife, but Orgon remains concealed. "Before we go any further", says Elmire, "just look down the hall to make sure my husband isn't coming." "Why worry about him?" says Tartuffe, "we can lead him around by the nose." Then Orgon comes from under the table. Where has the comedy brought us? Is it not to a contemplation of our own vanity, the source of the sense of honor in us all?

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

Are we laughing at Tartuffe and Orgon, or are we thinking of ourselves?

Falstaff and Tartuffe illustrate the generalizing of inferior characters by the ascribing of their faults to human nature. A good illustration of the comic character which enlists our admiration and is a genuine ideal is Huckleberry Finn. His ignorance, his poverty, and his lack of humor would seem to disqualify him for any heroic career in literature, yet he is a veritable hero, in the sense that we gladly put ourselves in his point of view and return again and again to live for an hour or so in his experience. The reason is that along with his inferior qualities he has characteristics and he has a fortune which seem better than ours; he is loyal to Tom and the negro Jim, he has a simple faith and zest in life, and he has exciting adventures and gets romance out of scenes we should otherwise find dull. He flatters

PROPER CHARACTERS

us too by admiring people and things which from his praise we know we should treat satirically. To know what comedy is, as opposed to satire, we have but to read his story again and compare it with any current indictment of the scene in which his adventure was laid.

IV

If the principles of tragedy, comedy and satire are as implicit in our psychology now as when Aristotle described them, and if the principles of decorum, of art, and of the timeless and the impersonal in art, are as rooted in life as they are declared to be, there might seem to be no great need to preach them; the practice of literature would disclose them in spite of our ignorance. Try as we might to make a lovable hero out of an inferior character, he would still emerge a figure in satire or, if we generalized his faults, a figure in comedy; in serious literature, only a character better than in real life would give satisfaction. Though we do not doubt that the principles of art will thus be rediscovered

PROPER CHARACTERS

pragmatically by the unescapable discipline of literature, yet it is something of a pity to go through such lengths of experiment in order to find out what was known before. And the great danger in our country is that we may not push the experiment to the tedious but profitable end at which sound knowledge awaits us; we may grow weary of the discipline, and take refuge in parody or in sentimentality. These two avenues of escape from the problem have cursed American literature before, and signs are not wanting that they now are the temptations of those who yesterday were our "new" writers and promised brave things. Face to face with characters worse than in actual life, we may find our own satiric attitude monotonous, but to handle such material otherwise than satirically, we must master the art of comedy, and comedy is an art too difficult. What Bret Harte and Riley

THE LITERARY DISCIPLINE

and Eugene Field did in such circumstances was to obscure the meanness of the subject by sentimentality, instead of illuminating it by the comic spirit. Spoon River has been celebrated before, though we may not have recognized the subject with the old sentimental surface removed; much of our contemporary satire has been the kind of surgical operation necessary to separate the American reader from the sentimentality which in his heart he likes. Since it is in his heart, he may express it again quite shamelessly, this time as a protest against too much satire, and we may have another welter of old oaken buckets and old swimming holes and little boy blues—the literature that provides the satisfaction of a good cry, without the over-exertion of tragic pity or terror. Already we have again the familiar and dilettante essay, the imitation of eighteenth-century style, even in newspaper

PROPER CHARACTERS

columns, the interminable parodies of Horace, which in this country have been the advance signals of the sentimental wave.

We can but hope that the signs may prove deceptive, and that literature in America will not wait much longer for the characters and subjects proper to it, and proper to the dramatic hour we live in—characters and subjects expressing that better part of us which has given our land its direction and its power, and expressing also that other world of the spirit which man builds for elbow-room to exercise his genuine ideals in, and carries it around with him, and sets it up to be a tabernacle in the wilderness of this natural world.

Erskine, John, 1879-1951.

American character and other essays, selected from the writings of John Erskine, especially for the Chautauqua home reading series. Chautauqua, N. Y., The Chautauqua press, 1927.

3 p. l., v-xii, 231 p. front. (port.) 20½ cm.

CONTENTS.—bk. I. American character.—bk. II. The moral obligation to be intelligent.—bk. III. The kinds of poetry.—bk. IV. The literary discipline.

1. National characteristics, American—Addresses, essays, lectures. 2. Poetry—Addresses, essays, lectures. 3. Literature—Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Title.

